



This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights and duplication or sale of all or part is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for research, private study, criticism/review or educational purposes. Electronic or print copies are for your own personal, non-commercial use and shall not be passed to any other individual. No quotation may be published without proper acknowledgement. For any other use, or to quote extensively from the work, permission must be obtained from the copyright holder/s.

KEELE UNIVERSITY

Primary school boys,  
academic achievement in  
literacy and hegemonic  
identities: a qualitative  
study

---

Jennifer Wells

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education – October 2016

## ABSTRACT

The perceptions held of the fundamental differences in the nature of boys and girls is an issue which has dominated educational discourse over recent years and thus, has shaped pedagogical approaches and policy. However, despite some calls to focus on how the social construction of masculinity affects boys' responses to school based literacy there is still a pervasive discourse which focuses on neurological and hormonal differences. Furthermore, the waters seem muddled by a narrative of the disempowerment of boys as a consequence of the success of the feminist movement, the answer to which has often been a call to return to more traditional roles and social practices. The extent to which this popular discourse impacts on policy decisions made by educational leaders cannot be underestimated and is reflected in the many proposals for improving boys' literacy results which are still often grounded in generalisations and stereotypes which place boys in one homogenous group who experience their identity in a single way. The current climate appears, therefore, to be one of mixed messages so that whilst scholars have pointed out the potential damage caused by solutions which reinforce socially constructed gender binaries, such approaches are still thriving.

This study employs qualitative methods to explore, through interviews, the ways in which boys talk about how they construct their masculinity within the school environment and draws conclusions as to how this gendered identity impacts upon their perception of practices which shape the literate individual such as reading, creative writing and personal expressive response to texts. The findings contradict some commonly held beliefs that hegemonic constructions of masculinity often reject the academic practices associated with literacy. In particular, the data challenges the idea that many boys are reluctant to be seen as succeeding academically in favour of an anti-school culture. The results offer instead, a nuanced picture of how boys perceive the study of literacy and how some boys actively resist forms of masculinity which might prevent them from achieving at school and are able to balance the need to succeed in literacy with their status as 'hegemonic' boys socially.

## **Dedication**

**This thesis is dedicated to my family for their endless love and support.**

To my daughter, Delilah, for sitting next to me in the library at Keele, quietly revising.

To my son, Luther, for spending longer than you ever wanted 'browsing' in the History section when I just couldn't seem to finish.

To my son, Milo, for the amount of times you reminded me to get on with it and for making me feel that it was all worthwhile. I will never forget that you bought me chocolates.

And finally,

To my husband, Jon Bailey, who has had to live through the process with me and has done so with never a complaint, despite all of the weekends that I have never been there.

## **Contents**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

1.1	Purpose and significance of the study.....	9
1.2	Education and Gender – background, practice and policy.....	13
1.3	Conceptual framework.....	19
1.4	Aim and research questions.....	23
1.5	Self placement in the topic – professional and personal.....	26
1.6	Methodology overview.....	29
1.7	Contribution to knowledge.....	30
1.8	Thesis structure.....	32
1.9	Summary.....	35

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review – boys and literacy**

2.1	Introduction.....	36
2.2	The inequalities between boys and girls.....	38
2.3	Failing boys.....	39
2.4	Boys being failed by education.....	42
	2.4.1 Boys and their biology.....	44
	2.4.2 The ‘problem’ with women.....	47
2.5	The feminisation of school.....	53

2.6	Failing schools.....	53
2.7	The impact of the crisis of masculinity on policy and practice..	55
2.8	The shaping of the literate individual.....	57
2.9	The influence of family and social class.....	60
2.10	Measuring competencies.....	65
2.11	Summary.....	66

### **Chapter 3: Multiple Masculinities: Social Construction, Performance and Maintaining the Gender Order**

3.1	Introduction.....	68
3.2	Theoretical approaches to masculinity.....	69
	3.2.1 Gender: old roles and modern expectations.....	70
	3.2.2 The male body.....	73
	3.2.3 The emotional male.....	77
	3.2.4 Masculinity and power.....	81
	3.2.5 Hegemonic masculinity.....	83
3.3	Maintaining the gender order.....	87
3.4	Masculinity in the school context.....	90
3.5	Summary.....	93

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

4.1	Introduction.....	95
4.2	Epistemological assumptions.....	95
	4.2.1. Feminist informed theories of masculinity.....	96
4.3	Aim and research questions.....	99
4.4	Methodology.....	101
4.5	The pilot study.....	105
4.6	Ethical issues.....	107
4.7	The primary school and its pupils.....	108
4.8	Why these boys?.....	112
4.9	The data collection process.....	114
	4.9.1 Discussion/focus groups.....	114
	4.9.2 Sampling.....	116
	4.9.3 Interviews.....	117
4.10	Data analysis.....	119
4.11	Summary.....	123

## **Chapter 5: How Do Boys Talk About Their Perception of Academic Success?**

5.1	Introduction.....	125
5.2	Academic success.....	126
	5.2.1 Being measured and tested.....	129
	5.2.2 Focus on the future.....	141

5.2.3	Progression and the role of the teacher.....	149
5.2.4	Pressure to compete and conflicting emotions.....	151
5.3	Summary.....	155

## **Chapter 6: How Do Boys Construct, Manage and Negotiate Their Masculine Identities Within the Primary School Context?**

6.1	Introduction.....	157
6.2	Exploring masculine identities.....	158
6.3	Being distinct from girls.....	162
6.3.1	Competition with girls.....	163
6.3.2	Different interests.....	166
6.3.3	Boys and girls are just...different.....	172
6.3.4	Expectations of behaviour.....	173
6.4	Different sorts of boy.....	181
6.4.1	Being tough.....	182
6.5	Expressing emotion.....	187
6.6	Desirable constructions of masculinity and being tough.....	191
6.6.1	Being good at football.....	193
6.6.2	Being cheeky and funny.....	200
6.6.3	Academic ability and the delicate balancing act of achievement.....	205
6.6.4	Gaming and games.....	215
6.6.5	Money and the display of wealth.....	217



6.6.6	The power of popularity.....	220
6.7	Summary.....	225

## **Chapter 7: What Gender Performances and Subjectivities Intersect with the Acceptance or Rejection of the Study of Literacy?**

7.1	Introduction.....	227
7.2	Are some subjects for girls or for boys?.....	223
7.3	I like what I'm good at.....	230
7.4	The different components of literacy.....	234
	7.4.1 It's not like anything in the real world.....	234
	7.4.2 I don't like writing but I love writing stories.....	237
	7.4.3 I just don't have any ideas.....	243
	7.4.4 Reading.....	249
	7.4.5 Emotional and empathetic response.....	256
7.5	Summary.....	262

## **Chapter 8: Conclusions: Implications for Pedagogy and Recommendations for Further Research**

8.1	Introduction.....	266
8.2	How boys talk about their perception of academic success or failure.....	269

8.3	How boys construct, manage and negotiate their masculine identities with the primary school context.....	<b>271</b>
8.4	What gender performancies and subjectivities intersect with the acceptance or rejection of the study of literacy?.....	<b>273</b>
8.5	Pedagogical implications and recommendations.....	<b>277</b>
8.6	Limitations and conclusion.....	<b>282</b>
	<b>References.....</b>	<b>284</b>
	Appendix I.....	<b>316</b>
	Appendix II.....	<b>318</b>
	Appendix III.....	<b>319</b>
	Appendix IV.....	<b>320</b>
	Appendix V.....	<b>324</b>
	Appendix VI.....	<b>325</b>
	Appendix VII.....	<b>328</b>
	Appendix VIII.....	<b>340</b>

## **Chapter 1: Introduction – Boys, Literacy and the Study**

### **1.1 Purpose and significance of the study**

This thesis sets out to research the relationship between boys' constructions of masculinity and their attitudes to literacy. The aim is to investigate the interplay between the construction of masculinities and the creation of the literate individual; one who is able to engage with texts and is proficient in their written expression. To this end, it explores, through interviews, the ways in which boys talk about how they construct their masculinity within the school environment and draws conclusions as to how this gendered identity impacts upon their perception of practices which shape the literate individual such as reading, creative writing and personal expressive response to texts.

The significance of the study is seen in the consistent attention given by both the media and policy makers to the issues surrounding boys and their literacy in recent years. This concern has been described by Millard as a 'moral panic' (1997:45) caused by what appears to be the failure of boys to reach national targets in literacy as compared to girls. Findings from educational research (Epstein et al, 1998, Skelton and Francis, 2001) as well as yearly headlines, highlight discrepancies in exam performance which have fed the imagination of the public, educators and policy makers. This has resulted in intervention policies and

the common perception that boys are somehow being let down by schools which fail to cater for, what are perceived as, innate traits of masculinity. In short, boys are said to be being failed by a 'feminised' education system; one in which the majority of teaching staff are female and are therefore perceived as engendering routines and practices which favour girls. These notions of femininity versus masculinity emanate from long held dichotomies of the binary categories of 'boy' and 'girl' which have been historically perceived as hardwired and unchanging. Although these perceptions have been challenged by gender theorists (Butler, 2004, 2011, Connell, 1995) and the ways of being a boy or a girl are less easily defined in our modern culture, such notions have proved difficult to wipe from the public consciousness and the view that 'men are from Mars and women are from Venus' lingers on. The extent to which this popular discourse impacts on policy decisions made by educational leaders cannot be underestimated and is reflected in the many proposals for improving boys' literacy results which are often grounded in generalisations and stereotypes which place boys in one homogenous group who experience their identity in a single way.

As I will show in data chapter 6, all of the boys in this study identify with a particular gender category, that of being male, yet their labelling and discussion of the behaviour of their peers acknowledges that within this category it is possible to be many different kinds of boy. This study is therefore about their gender identity as boys and how their orientation to studying literacy fits in with the type of boy they want to be (or want to be seen to be). The research seeks to expose

whether, in constructing their masculinity, choices are made to accept or reject the study of literacy as it may not be in keeping with the way in which they would like to be perceived by their peers in the school environment.

More recent sociological studies on popularity amongst peers (La Fontana & Cillessen, 2002, Cillessen, 2011) and studies at secondary schools on 'laddish culture' (Jackson, 2003, 2010, McKellan, 2004) have shown that some constructions of masculinity involve the rejection of being seen to be successful academically, favouring instead the image of rebelling against the authority of teachers and being 'too cool for school' which can engender a positive perception amongst peers (Mayeux et al. 2008). During research undertaken in my own pilot study in 2012 which informed the design of the empirical study reported in this thesis, the gendered nature of classroom culture appeared evident. The evidence, discussed more fully in the methodology chapter, showed that in focus groups and subsequent interviews with boys in year 7 and 8, they labelled each other using more modern cultural references such as 'chavs' and 'geeks' but it was clear that there was still a dominant or hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). This was determined by the collective and cultural practices at school which valued sport, verbal and physical aggression and a degree of rebellion against authority. Some competing masculinities were marginalized, by being given lower status labels such as 'nerds' which referred to boys who achieved academically or who were seen to work hard in class. However, the rejection of academic achievement was not the whole picture and it became apparent from the focus groups that it was

acceptable to excel in PE and maths whereas to be good in literacy based subjects, particularly English, would result in being considered a 'spof' (a derogatory label meaning 'bookish'). This evidence of a hegemonic masculinity suggested that there was a need to consider this in any data collected for this thesis and it is therefore discussed in detail in the literature review, in Chapter 3, which outlines both its use as a framework and its limitations.

The overall conclusion drawn from the pilot in 2012 was that where I had expected to find that 'laddish' culture would be emergent in year 7, I found instead that the perception of academic achievement and attitudes towards particular subjects such as literacy were already embedded. This subsequently informed the direction of this study to explore whether these ideas were also expressed by younger boys in the primary school context where attitudes to education are still forming and constructions of masculinity are emergent. In re-focusing my study from secondary to primary it is hoped that the research will be fruitful in offering an understanding of how, and even when, tensions between some constructions of masculinity and literate practices begin. Finally, this study also shows how some boys actively resist forms of masculinity which might prevent them from achieving at school and are able to balance a love of literacy with their status as 'hegemonic' boys socially.

## **1.2 Education and gender – background, practice and policy**

From the 1970s onwards feminist researchers, in both the UK and other western nations, began to investigate the ways in which the education system engendered inequalities between boys and girls. Social prejudices were shown to be endemic and it was argued that stereotypes, including the idea of the passive girl and the aggressive boy, were not only expected but also accepted (Spender and Sarah, 1980, Askew and Ross, 1988).

Much of the attention of this early feminist research was focused on the experience of girls at school and there was a particular concern at the lack of opportunities in certain areas of the curriculum such as maths, science and IT. It was, therefore, these areas which formed much of the basis for their work on reducing inequalities within the education system. Whilst these inequalities were clearly demonstrated by studies (Spender and Sarah, 1980, Skelton, 1989) in terms of an imbalance in treatment and opportunity, early surveys such as that of the Inner London Education Authority, found that there was no significant difference in performance in both practical and written maths between the genders at primary level. However, it did find that girls were significantly better in literacy based skills (Junior Survey, 1986) and thus, the feminist scrutiny of girls and their school experience resulted in the performance of boys also being made visible.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s there has been a growing anxiety about the performance of boys and they have been increasingly perceived and discussed as being disadvantaged and failing within the education system. This has not only been confined to Britain but is also true of several large western countries including America and Australia. Each year there appears to be an increasing media interest in this 'gender divide' and this scrutiny has fed a rising sense of panic and developed an on-going discourse which views boys' education as a problem to be addressed (Epstein et al, 1998, Lingard and Douglas, 1999, Skelton, 2001, Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010). This often posits boys as increasingly marginalized and disengaged, a rhetoric which has given rise to various explanations for the underachievement of older boys which include, the impact of feminism, feminised schools, biology and the crisis of masculinity, all of which are all explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Labelled by Kenway (1998) as the 'lads' movement, the discourse of 'poor boys' in crisis positions them as not just failing but as *being* failed. Specifically, boys are constructed as the victims of fatherless families, schools dominated by women and of feminism which has struggled to enable girls to the detriment of boys. As noted by Weiner et al (1997), discourses of male underachievement in the school context are often posited as a 'collorary of female success' with their needs being subsumed in the process of prioritising the position of women and minority groups (Bleach, 1998a, 1998b). Boys are seen as being disadvantaged by having no similar 'movement' to protect their interests which are under attack from feminists,



who not only seek to advantage women, but are trying to 'feminise' boys with their relentless attack on masculinity; a masculinity which is viewed as biologically determined (Gurian, 2004). Sommers (2000) even goes as far as to describe this as a 'war on boys' which exemplifies the discourse of 'competition' where the improvement in equality for girls can only be seen in binary terms where their 'winning' must logically be at the expense of a 'losing' opposition. Such ideas suit a determinist argument which posits that boys and girls can only be understood as the binary opposites, 'where boys are active, girls are passive, where boys are loud, girls are quiet; where boys are mathematical, girls are literate' (Rowan et al, 2002:31). Therefore in this essentialist mindset, boys are disadvantaged in any context where women dominate and can create an environment where the 'natural interests' of girls are seen to be more highly valued.

The perceptions held of the fundamental differences in the nature of boys and girls is an issue which has dominated educational discourse over recent years and thus, has shaped pedagogical approaches and policy. However, despite some calls to focus on how the social construction of masculinity affects boys' responses to school based literacy activities (Alloway, 2007, Whitmire, 2010) there is still a pervasive discourse which focuses on neurological and hormonal differences and a belief that boys are unable to sit still or concentrate for extended periods (Gurian & Stevens, 2004b). The waters seem further muddied by the narrative of the disempowerment of boys as a consequence of the success of the feminist movement, the answer to which has often been a call to return to more traditional

roles and social practices (Sommers, 2000, Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010).

This has been witnessed at the highest levels of education with even the former minister, Michael Gove, claiming that there is a need to bring back a 'dangerous books for boys' culture (Whitehead, 2010 in The Telegraph).

Between 2000 – 2010, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) implemented a range of strategies to address the issue of boys and their literacy skills including 'Reading Champions' to encourage the celebration of positive role models (many of them sporting heroes) and 'Boys into Books' promoting 'boy friendly' reading materials. A drive was also seen in 2007- 2008 by the Training and Development Agency for Schools to stress the importance of male primary school teachers as role models. In 'Raising Boys Achievement' (Younger & Warrington, 2005), educational strategies in the UK were noted to focus mostly on literacy but despite the conclusion that there is no evidence to suggest that boys are biologically predisposed to learn in certain ways, the focus of many teaching methods is kinaesthetic in nature, promoting interactive activities, group work and physical and practical activities. Also promoted is the widespread use of 'gender friendly' texts with material 'attractive to boys'. At an organisational level, some schools had opted for single sex classes and at a socio cultural level encouraged mentoring so that boys had male role models to encourage reading.

The current climate appears, therefore, to be one of mixed messages between the competing public, professional and scholarly discourses so that whilst scholars

have pointed out the potential damage caused by solutions which reinforce socially constructed gender binaries, such approaches are still thriving. On one hand, educators are directed not to view boys and girls as large homogenous groups but on the other, within reports, there is much talk of 'boys' and their specific needs. The 'Boys Commission Report' (National Literacy Trust, 2012) outlines how it is still a common belief that boys' underachievement in literacy is linked to the fact that they are unable to sit still and that levels of testosterone are thought to be a factor. The report dispels this myth with reference to the literature review by Lloyd (2011) who found little evidence to prove a causal relationship between testosterone and male behaviour. However, this is offered alongside the idea that boys tend to read different kinds of texts from girls and are turned off reading due to the wrong type of books being included in the school curriculum. It could be argued therefore, that the assumptions and responses of policy makers and educators concerning the causes of a gender gap may be based on some questionable assumptions and may do more harm than good, an idea which is explored in the literature review in Chapter 2. What is clear, however, is that there is still a need for contemporary research into the construction of masculinity and its impact on achievement in school based literacy.

Whilst some determinist ideas have been considered in various initiatives designed to redress the balance of 'disadvantaged boys', researchers such as Connolly (2004), argue that most do not consider masculinity itself and how it is expressed within the school context. This is despite the considerable amount of

research carried out as to how young people construct their gender relations at school (Blaise, 2005, Cullen 2010, Francis, 2008, 2010) and the important advances made which suggest how gender can be theorized more generally. There have been a number of studies carried out in the primary school setting which discuss the construction of pre-adolescent masculinities (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, Epstein et al.2001, Skelton, 2001, Connolly, 2004, Swain, 2006, Clark & Paetcher, 2007, Martin, 2010, Bartholomaeus, 2012). Some of these studies, such as that of Skelton (1997) and Renold (2001), have particularly noted the ways in which the construction of masculinity impacts upon boys' disposition to the experience of academic achievement. However, I would argue that in the current climate of continuing concerns of attainment at literacy and the introduction of compulsory literacy at post 16, there is a need for a study, such as this, which focuses specifically on orientation to literacy with the emphasis on the early stages of education where policies for intervention could, arguably, have a significant impact on learner identity. Contemporary research amongst young learners is also essential as it serves to highlight the impact of policies introduced to date. Finally, it is important to explore the world of a new generation of boys as they negotiate their masculinity in a very different landscape from the young men who have done so before them. As discussed in Chapter 3, theirs is a changing world with changing gender roles and so for educators to address their needs, their experience needs to be understood.

### 1.3 Conceptual framework

The epistemological view which underpins the study draws upon key theoretical concepts within the field of feminist- informed studies of masculinity, particularly the work of Connell (1987, 2005) and her concept of hegemony. This is built upon using Foucault's concept of discourse so that a nuanced picture of how the gender order is created and maintained can be offered. One of the fundamental concepts of this research which is detailed in Chapter 3 is that masculine identities are not 'hardwired' but rather, as asserted by Connell (1995, 2005) and Renold (2005b), are developed dynamically through social interaction which is itself informed by much broader social structures. The study takes the view that gender is performative and actualised through a series of repetitive performances rather than biologically predetermined (Butler, 2006) and that, as asserted by Mary Crawford (1995), 'gender' would be better perceived as a verb; as something which is enacted rather than something we are. Renold (2005b), in using this concept for her own research, describes how she witnessed 'the attempt to project an abiding gendered self [and] the despair at the impossibility of this task' (2005b:5). Thus the research is framed by wider theories of discourse which outline the essential role of interaction and its impact upon identity and the lived experience (Wertsch 1995). The boys' concepts of gender roles is an essential part of this study for as Lakoff and Johnson point out (2003:3) 'the concepts that govern our thoughts, govern our everyday functioning. Our concepts structure

what we perceive, how we get around in the world and how we relate to other people'. Hence, the research questions focus entirely on how the boys talk about themselves and their peers in the context of the school environment and take the approach of looking for the influences of communities of practice there (Paetcher, 2007).

The challenge to essentialist views of gender is further continued in the work of Judith Halberstam (1998) who, in applying Butler's model, sought to sever any connection between the gendered self and the sexed body by challenging the idea that only boys perform masculinities in her work on 'masculinity without men'. However, whilst this study accepts a view of gender as socially constructed, it also recognizes that the sexed body does have an impact on informing the choices which can be made by, or the constraints placed upon, an individual. For the purpose of this study it is necessary to recognize the pressures placed upon boys by virtue of their sexed bodies in terms of the choices they may feel they have to make in constructing a socially acceptable or exalted form of masculinity and more importantly, how this is played out in the early years.

One of the most important concepts considered in the study is that of hegemonic masculinity and how boys achieve a socially exalted form which is recognized by their peers. Originally introduced by Connell (1987), this concept has been criticized due to its focus on negative attributes (Jefferson, 2002) and its 'one-dimensional' approach (Peterson, 1998, Demetriou, 2001). In answer to

criticisms, Connell (2005) has since offered a reformulation of the concept which demonstrates a more complex view of gender hierarchy with an explicit recognition of the influences of geography, privilege and power which can lead to internal contradictions. This study therefore explores how power is distributed and the influence of a discursive construction of reality (Whitehead, 2002) in achieving this. Hence, a qualitative approach to the study is adopted to explore the criteria for the labelling of boys by each other as this is central to understanding how a hierarchy is created and maintained in the school environment.

This study follows in the tradition of rejecting the idea of a static identity and also views hegemonic masculinity as a fluid and unstable concept; it focuses on hegemony within the context of the primary school environment which can possibly only be recognised against subordination and how it employs this for various ends. This post-structuralist view of masculinity as inherently unstable could perhaps be seen as problematic in any study which focuses on masculinity with all of its tensions and contradictions, an issue highlighted by Renold (2005) in her own research in primary school. However, despite the changing views of how the concept of hegemonic masculinity should be framed, it is fundamental to this study which explores why boys may maintain a certain construct of masculinity despite its rejection of values promoted by the school.

One reason why boys may seek a hegemonic form of masculinity may be the desire for popularity amongst their peers and this study also strives to discover

from the boys what it is to be 'popular' and how this is achieved. Described by Francis et al (2010b) as a 'complex and slippery' concept, it was revealed, in her attempts to measure the popularity of girls and boys amongst peers at school, that those who were considered the most popular were not necessarily those most liked. It may be, therefore, that the concept of popularity amongst peers may be inextricably linked to hegemony due to the power wielded by boys who hold a socially exalted position rather than about simply being liked (Cillessen et al, 2011).

Whilst some theoretical assumptions have been made in respect of how gender is socially constructed, the research questions reveal the exploratory nature of the inquiry. Therefore the use of language such as 'how' and 'perception' signals the openness of the inquiry as to what will emerge during the discussion with the participants. In seeking to gather the perception of the participants, the relative nature of this is accepted and may be different for different boys. As the purpose of the study is to examine how social experience is created and given meaning it is therefore located in post-structuralist, qualitative research traditions in which the social construction of reality is explored.



## 1.4 Aim and Research Questions

My research centres on the question: does the way in which boys actively construct, manage and negotiate their masculine identity in the primary school environment impact on their perception of literacy?

In order to address this I ask specifically,

- How do boys talk about their perception of academic success or failure?
- How do boys construct, manage and negotiate their masculine identities within the primary school context?
- What gender performances and subjectivities intersect with the acceptance or rejection of the study of literacy?

Central to the overall aim is to discuss the *perception* of literacy so that regardless of engagement or performance in terms of participation, school targets and grades, the value of the activities within the literacy classroom is seen through the eyes of the boys. By ensuring a consistent focus on *perception* it is my intention to consider the rejection of literacy in a wider sense rather than an active refusal to participate in schoolwork.

The first research question was designed to ensure that any rejection of literate practices was not simply a 'bi-product' of a wider disengagement with the school process. I felt this was essential to the study as, whilst the association with literate practices as being 'unmasculine' has already been widely evidenced (Connell 1989, Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, Martino, 1999, Brozo, 2005), this has often been linked to a general 'too cool for school' attitude (Jackson, 2003, 2010) which is discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2. The first question therefore allowed for general discussion of what academic success meant to the boys as well as giving scope to talk about their perception of other subjects in the curriculum and how these compared to literacy. The question was also designed to gauge whether, contrary to the findings of earlier studies, contemporary boys value academic success as suggested by Skelton and Francis' 'Renaissance Child' (2011a, 2011b) which is also explored in Chapter 2. A further possibility was that some boys might value academic success enough to engage with literacy whilst still expressing a conflict with it in terms of their masculinity.

The purpose of the second research question was to explore some of the different ways that boys felt it was possible to construct themselves as contemporary young men. This was considered through the lens of the pressures placed upon them due to their body and expected societal role, as outlined in the literature review in Chapter 3. The question was designed to explore how the boys talked about the ways in which they behaved as well as how they felt they were expected to

behave. It was also intended to ascertain what the boys perceived to be desirable or hegemonic constructions as defined in the literature review by Connell, (2005). This was approached by considering how peers labelled each other, whether this was positive or negative and who was considered to be popular or admired and why. The question specifically asked how behaviour is 'managed' and 'negotiated' to address how any boundaries were policed amongst peers. In this way I hoped to tease out how norms of masculinity were reinforced through practices of power as suggested by Foucault (1980) which is explored in this thesis in Chapter 3. This was a key concept in considering how boys were learning to establish their emergent masculinities on a performative level. The phrase 'primary context' was used in the question in recognition that there were various spaces within the school such as the playground which might be supervised to a greater or lesser degree by adults and thus make a significant difference to behaviour. It was intended to encourage the boys to discuss any subtle differences in their identity as influenced by the different spaces available. In this way I hoped to capture any nuances or conflicts presented by expectations of the teachers versus those of peers.

The purpose of the final question was to draw together the findings of the previous two, to explicitly make connections between the discussions of gendered performancies and the orientation towards the activities required in literacy. This allowed me to revisit some of the comments made by the boys and explore their

engagement with literacy through the lens of how they discussed constructing themselves as young men.

### **1.5 Self placement in the topic- professional and personal**

I am fascinated by the role that literature and stories play in our lives. Stories have a universality and 'no language is without [them] either orally or culturally' (Carter et al. 1989:12) Thus, experiences of stories can be highly significant in our lives. However, beyond the text itself, literature and reading are important in our society because it is a culturally valued activity and as people we wish to participate in meaningful 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999). It is also true that beyond what may perhaps be considered the luxury of enjoying a good book, that literacy skills have a far reaching effect on economic prospects; those who struggle with literacy are four times more likely to claim state benefits. For these reasons it is essential that research about how boys relate to literacy needs to continue, particularly studies which seek to inform pedagogy to close any gender gap in achievement.

The idea of sharing literature is very much integrated into the teaching of literacy and seen as a tool to tackle the effects of poor basic skills, a concept that I am very much committed to. My own career started with teaching literacy to adults

and my commitment to teaching English has not waned even though my career has moved on and I am now the Head of an English Department in an FE College where I deliver 'A' Levels. Instead, this has led to a fresh focus on why a disproportionate number of girls take English each year and the concern that the subject is viewed as somewhat 'feminine'.

The issue of the impact of gender on engagement with literacy has also become particularly pertinent for me with the introduction of a Government policy in 2013 which demands a post-16 resit for students who have not achieved a C grade in English as a condition of funding. Being responsible for managing this course, it is clear to see that the extra five hundred students I have gained are, disproportionately, boys.

It is perhaps the experience of having children (a daughter and twin boys) which has been the greatest influence on my area of research as I have watched them negotiate primary school and start to enjoy or reject different subjects. Their journey through school has led them to become the young men and young woman that they are and the school environment has played a large part in how they have constructed and managed their gendered identities. However, my twins, each of them unique, could be considered to be very different kinds of boy and their masculinities appear to dictate that they engage with school in very different ways.

Certainly some of the intervention strategies suggested to encourage boys to engage with literacy such as the idea of introducing more non-fiction, taking a more practical approach, or reading books about 'boy-friendly' subjects such as sport (Martino 2008b, Books for Boys, 2010) would engage one of my twins. However, it would most definitely alienate the other. Furthermore, it is possible that such ideas may actively constrain the choices he feels possible for himself in the implied message they contain of what it entails to be a 'proper' boy. I am therefore concerned on both a professional and personal level that discourses which suggest that literacy is not a 'natural' subject for boys not only reflect but construct and perpetuate social practice (Fairclough, 1992) .

By the time my sons were in year 7, I could clearly see that there were concerns about being labelled negatively by peers for a love of reading and academic ability, although one of them, despite excelling at school, was extremely popular amongst his peers. This was the springboard for one of the focuses of the study to explore how some boys do manage to participate in literacy and achieve academically whilst not being marginalized. Hence the study is not all about seeking answers *for* the boys but *from* the boys. It is clear from discussion with my own sons that already they have certain ideas about masculinity and what it means to be a man. Certainly, how to behave at school seems to play a large part in this, at this stage in their lives. My son, perhaps, knows more than I. As he recently informed me, 'mum, you don't need to do all of this work. I can tell you how to be good at school

and popular. All you need to do is be good at football and you can get away with anything.'

Deem (1996) and Simpson (2009) both discuss the importance in identifying subjectivities and I believe that it is particularly important to explore my own perspective in order to recognise my own voice within the interpretation of the data and to address any issues of balance or dominance. As discussed, my interest in exploring children in their early years does stem from my subjective experience of being a mother. However, in exploring the importance of my own children in my life it is important to recognise that not all children can be compared to my own, nor, despite them being so different from each other, do they represent the only perspectives which young boys may have. Furthermore, due to my gender and age, these perspectives will, for me, only ever be seen from the outside looking in.

## **1.6 Methodology Overview**

The methodological approach is discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis. The empirical study was carried out from March to July 2015 in a primary school and involved all of the boys from years 4, 5 and 6, thirty-three of whom took part in focus groups. The data was analysed following each focus group and common themes were then identified which were used to inform who would be sampled for

subsequent interviews to ensure that a range of views were captured. Sixteen boys were then asked to go on to take part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Drever, 2003). This enabled me to provide some guidance as to the themes which needed to be discussed yet allowed the freedom for the participants to explore aspects of their experience which they felt were relevant. Both the literature used to contextualize the study and the research questions pointed towards a constructivist, discourse-based perspective. From working closely with the data, a large number of themes were identified based on the research questions and the extant literature of similar research already carried out.

The analysis of the interviews drew upon Foucauldian (1980, 2002) notions of discourse as issues of how power is negotiated, possessed and denied in the school context were particularly important in addressing how more desirable forms of masculinity or the 'popular boy' are constructed. Due consideration was given to my own voice within the study and this was consciously inserted to avoid this self being concealed (Scott et al, 1999, 2011).

## **1.7 Contribution to knowledge**

This study makes a contribution to knowledge in offering some conclusions about how boys present themselves as literate individuals in the context of primary



education. It also explores some wider discourses of our education system in order that it brings about discussion and consideration of pedagogical methods and also the criteria by which competencies are measured.

The data contributes to the knowledge base of education as it exposes how boys at primary school relate to the idea of academic success, the findings of which conflict with that of earlier investigations conducted within the context of secondary school. The findings reveal how boys engage with modern schooling and all of its associated focus on targets, competition and league tables and appear to have internalised the intrinsic value of being measured in these ways.

The relating of the boys' experiences of school points to how their masculinity is constructed against the shifting sands of modern cultural expectations which are placed on them. This offers a view of how boys are adapting to the notion of equality and within this their idea that, boy or girl, 'anybody can do anything' which is still paradoxically set against the influence of long held stereotypes of what it is to be a boy in terms of physical, emotional and behavioural expectations. With regards to this, also revealed in their stories, is the role of the school in creating and maintaining such expectations.

This study shows the gendered nature of the school experience and the persistence of a 'two cultures' conceptualisation that values and reinforces different behaviour (Smith and Leaper, 2006). However, whilst this may ultimately

lead to the rejection of activities which are not strongly associated with masculinity, this attitude is nascent rather than fully embedded. The study therefore, contributes significantly in that it points to a time in the educational life of boys when the study of literacy is valued and offers an insight into how and why this changes as the behaviours of the different communities of practice of boys and girls become more entrenched.

## **1.8 Thesis Structure**

Having provided a brief introduction in chapter 1, chapter 2 offers a literature review which traces the historical context of how the issue of the underachievement of boys has become a cause for consistent scrutiny. This is explored in two sections, the first of which charts how early feminist researchers, in focusing on inequalities in education, inadvertently made the performance of boys visible. This section also offers a critique of the explanations for their underachievement drawing on the concept of the 'feminisation' of the school system and the alleged impact this has had in terms of pedagogical intervention. This is important to the study as it reveals how such an idea has influenced and continues to influence contemporary policy and practice. Furthermore, I argue that as a consequence, policy responses can be ineffective by perpetuating a binary

concept of boys and girls where for one gender to make gains, it must do so at the expense of the other.

The second section of the literature review focuses on how boys are said to engage with reading, literacy and academic study and the influences which shape them as literate individuals. Here, the literature is discussed which explores how the construction of masculinity may affect their attitude to education; a premise which underpins this study as it demonstrates that some ways of 'doing boy' can influence orientation. This section also discusses other influences such as socio-economic status and cultural capital so that such variables are acknowledged.

Having provided a comprehensive literature review of boys at school in chapter 2, the next chapter discusses in more detail the theoretical background to masculinities and explains the post structuralist position taken in the study. To this end, both materialist and post structuralist perspectives are outlined and critiqued so that the need to consider the impact of the material body as well as the social construction of gender is fully justified. There is also a particular focus on the idea of hegemonic masculinity and the difficulties which using such a concept presents. It is argued, however, that the concept of hegemony is still relevant and essential to this investigation.

The methodological approach for the study, including ethical concerns, is presented in chapter 4. This includes both discussion and justification for the

method chosen as well as outlining procedures. An analysis of the data which responds to the first research question is then offered in chapter 5 which explores how boys talk about their experience of academic success or failure. Here it is argued that boys engage in, and value, the process of being measured or tracking progress to such an extent that it bleeds out to all aspects of school life, both in and out of the classroom. .

Chapter 6 concentrates on the ways in which masculinity is constructed, negotiated and maintained within the primary school environment. The different ways they talk about being a boy are scrutinised and it is shown that some constructions of masculinity are more desirable than others, bringing the reward of greater popularity and the admiration of peers. The competencies required to achieve this are identified and set against their perception of how this might differ from the experience of being a girl or other boys who may exhibit different behaviour. Key findings in relation to the perception of the activities required in the study of literacy and how it intersects with the more desirable constructions of masculinity, as discussed by the boys, are discussed in chapter 7. Finally, chapter 8 offers a summary with conclusions, limitations and recommendations.

## **1.9 Summary**

This chapter presented an overview of the study and discussed, briefly, the background information and concepts which are essential to it. The following chapters explore both the historical context and the concept of masculinity in more detail.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review – Boys and Literacy**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter offered an introduction to the competing scholarly, public and professional discourses which surround boys and their achievement in literacy. These are important to understand as they form the basis of the context in which educational policy decisions are made. This chapter explores the extant literature so that the relevant themes and issues introduced in Chapter 1 can be further parsed and explored.

In the first section, this chapter outlines why there is an ongoing educational focus on boys and their performance in literacy and explains how the discrepancy at school between boys and girls, has come to be perceived as a crisis. For the purposes of this study it is necessary to explore the wider, historical context of boys and their schooling to understand how the perception of boys being in crisis academically is perhaps linked to a wider modern discourse about masculinity itself - one which is rooted in concerns about the changing roles of men and women brought about by an erosion of typical patterns of employment, growth of consumer culture and the success of the feminist movement. Here, I argue that

the resulting wave of 'backlash' politics' (Skelton, 2001) has impacted on current pedagogic practice resulting in approaches which often rely on essentialist and materialist understandings of boys which push for them to be allowed to express a nature which is considered to be biologically innate. This idea of masculinity in crisis in a wider sense also explains the culture of the blaming of women as exemplified in the idea of a 'feminised' educational system which operates to the detriment of boys.

Whilst the first section explores the delivery of literacy and education on a wider, organisational level, the second section discusses a range of influences which shape the literate individual. Here, scholarly discourse is explored surrounding the social construction of masculinity and how this impacts upon engagement with both literacy and schooling in general. This discussion underpins the rationale for this study in that findings show that some constructions of masculinity can indeed work against boys' engagement in school literacy practices. However, in addition to masculinity, the influence of family and class are also explored to avoid offering an oversimplified view of gender and education. This is also central to understanding methodological decisions made for this thesis in trying to minimise variables so that the focus of the study remains firmly on the impact of masculinity.

## **2.2 The inequalities between boys and girls**

From the 1970s onwards feminist researchers in the UK began to investigate the ways in which the education system engendered inequalities between boys and girls. Social prejudices were shown to be endemic and it was argued that many gender based stereotypes were both expected and accepted (Spender and Sarah, 1980, Weiner 1985, Askew and Ross, 1988). It was also shown that because of the expectations of behaviour based on gender that girls were often expected to take a more passive role and refrain from behaviour such as shouting out in class whereas for boys this was seen as naturally competitive and rewarded with time and attention. The expectation of boys' dominance meant that teachers spent more time overall with boys, to the detriment of girls (French and French 1984).

Much of the attention of early feminist research was focused on the experience of girls at school and there was a particular concern at the lack of opportunities in certain areas of the curriculum (Spender and Sarah, 1980, Askew & Ross, 1988, Skelton, 1989). This formed much of the basis for their work on reducing inequalities and whilst this was clearly demonstrated by studies (Spender and Sarah, 1980, Skelton, 1989) in terms of an imbalance in treatment and opportunity, early surveys such as that of the Inner London Education Authority found that there was no significant difference in performance in both practical and written maths between the genders at primary level. However, it did find that girls were



significantly better in literacy based skills (Junior Survey, 1986) and thus, the feminist scrutiny of girls and their school experience also resulted in highlighting the performance of boys.

### **2.3 Failing Boys**

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s there has been a growing public and professional anxiety in the UK and many western countries about the performance of boys and they have been increasingly discussed as being disadvantaged and failing within the education system. It could be argued that this concern of 'failing boys' in the school environment is, in part, connected to the shift in the economic landscape caused by the impact of new technology which has transformed both the availability and nature of work and created an anxiety of what to do with boys who would previously been prepared at school for manual labour.

As traditional, heavy industries have slowly declined since the 1980s there has also been a marked decline in the amount of manual labour required in the UK. This shift has resulted in a labour market where more women are being employed than ever before resulting in an increasingly competitive marketplace where men can no longer rely on the advantage of physical strength. In this process, men have been seen to be deprived of what was considered to be one of the markers

of traditional patriarchal masculinity, that of the role of breadwinner (Benyon, 2002). Furthermore, whilst a new, more flexible marketplace has seen an increase in part-time and temporary work, this is often perceived as being better suited to women, particularly those who are trying to balance work with family life.

In tandem with the demise of a role for those boys who would traditionally have followed their fathers into heavy industry, has been the growth of consumer culture; 'the development and proliferation of the 'image industries' [where] 'desires' replaced 'needs' and what people were, became increasingly based upon what they owned' (Beynon, 2002:14). In a time when the pressure to demonstrate status through goods such as houses, cars and clothes, has never seemed higher, boys who would have been destined for traditional manual labour are viewed as 'robbed' of the opportunity to compete for these things and therefore denied the chance to succeed. Interestingly, whilst the changing economic landscape has been blamed for this, and indeed was fought against, particularly during the closing of mines during the 1980s, feminism has also been blamed due to the connection with the new 'feminised' work place (Jensen et al., 1988, Yeandle, 1995); one in which laws for equality have created opportunities for them, their numbers have increased, and with the reduction of the need for physical strength, they are able to compete for jobs with men. This, along with the changing profile of the family, where divorce is more commonplace and women are seen as being able to bring up children alone, both financially and emotionally independent, has resulted in a feminist backlash claiming that boys have no place either

economically or socially, described by Clare (2001) as the 'redundant male'. There are also concerns of how boys who can no longer be funnelled into manual labour and take up their role as provider may turn to crime without employment and with their exclusion from consumer society. That boys who were destined for manual labour were often historically framed as 'rebels' is seen in Willis's ethnographic study of 'rebel' students in 'Learning to Labour' (1977) in which he demonstrated how their counter-school culture of resistance to academia prepared them well for the industrial environment and managed them into these types of jobs via structural conditions which kept them within the rigid boundaries of their class. To leave these contemporary 'rebels' idle then, leads to concern.

The idea of a man without employment has changed little since Willis' study and it has been claimed that nothing proves more damaging to their sense of masculinity than the ultimate humiliation of being supported by a working wife (Kelvin and Jarrett 1985). The attitude towards this is also highlighted in more recent polls carried out by the Fatherhood Institute who claim that only 10% of fathers would choose to take longer paternity leave despite the recently introduced legislation supporting shared parental care, citing status anxiety as well as pay as an issue (Davies, in Heighton, 2014). Thus, boys are often positioned as having become the victims of the successes of feminism as women have moved into areas traditionally dominated by men but conversely, men are still excluded from traditionally female jobs (Coward, 1999). Hence, the blame culture can either posit women as not contributing to the global market by staying at home with their

children or undermining the role of the traditional breadwinner if they choose to take paid employment. It has also been suggested that the loss of the role of the 'stay at home mother' is destabilizing to their sons' educations as boys, more than girls, appear to be affected by both parents working (Harding 1997).

## **2.4 Boys being failed by education**

The performance of boys at school is often linked to a more general crisis of masculinity and the role of men in contemporary society. It is therefore important to consider the on-going discourse which views boys' education as a problem to be addressed against the statistical evidence to support such claims.

Since the publication of the 1996 Ofsted report (The Gender Divide) there has been a consistent focus on the difference in academic performance between genders which has given rise to the idea that boys are somehow disadvantaged by the education system. Statistics such as those from the National Association of Educators in Practice (NAEP, 2011) showed that in reading tasks 28% of Year 8 boys attained the level of 'proficient or above' as compared to 37% of girls. In writing tasks the gap was highlighted as being even more pronounced where the figure for girls achieving 'proficient' at 42% was almost double that of boys. This report, like much of the literature produced, focuses on performance in literacy where the greatest discrepancy appears to be. However, in his 'Boys and

Schooling in the Early Years' (2004), Connolly offers a comprehensive analysis of reports of GCSE performance and highlights the often misleading conclusions which are drawn from only looking at percentage point in achievements by gender and the gap between them. Connolly points out that, in fact, boys have increased their performance rate at a slightly greater rate over a ten year period than girls so there is little evidence to suggest that the situation is becoming worse and that, in fact, 'achievements of boys and girls [have] actually been stable over the last decade and, if anything, boys are now showing some limited signs of being able to catch up with girls' (ibid:14). There are also still subjects where boys leave school with better results than girls such as science, business and IT. This, in itself, appears to dispel the myth that boys are failing to engage with school especially considering that not all boys are failing and indeed, not all girls are achieving. Statistics from 2015 from the Centre for Education and Employment research (CEER) show that boys still outperform girls in maths GCSE A\*- C achievement and yet in a recent Guardian Article, 'The Biggest Gap in 11 Years', (Arnett, 2014) the focus remains on the discrepancy of overall performance at 73% for girls as compared with 64.3% for boys. Again, the performance in English is highlighted as a cause for concern with the blame firmly placed upon the method of examination which is pointed to as advantaging girls due to their 'natural' higher ability in verbal skills and preference for coursework and modular exams (Smithers, in Arnett, 2014).

If there is some statistical evidence to suggest that not all boys are failing, it is important to consider how this discourse has arisen and why it endures. Stierer (1991) suggests that unlike the feminist research carried out in the 1980s, which was firmly rooted in research, that much of the fear of boys in crisis has been manipulated by the 'New Right'. Connolly (2004) also discusses how this rhetoric has given rise to various explanations for the underachievement of older boys. These he divides into six main categories: biological, feminised schools, failing schools, the crisis of masculinity, the impact of feminism and 'laddish' behaviour. All of these have been considered in various initiatives designed to redress the balance of 'disadvantaged boys' but Connolly argues that most do not consider masculinity itself and how it is expressed within the school context. As each of the explanations may hinder any fresh perspective on how masculinity impacts upon education, the next section explores, critically, each of them and their impact on the perception of boys and literacy.

#### ***2.4.1 Boys and their biology***

Current discourses both public and professional often rely on essentialist understandings which view gender as physiologically based (Martino et al, 2007, Martino, 2008, Whitmore, 2010) and cite differences in basic 'hardwiring' of the brain to account for a difference in development. Hannan (1999) asserts that the

brains of boys develop along such different pathways and pace to the brains of girls that, as a result, the 'male brain' finds it difficult to deal with reflective, emotional tasks, instead preferring speculation and action. However, whilst some studies do point to early developmental differences in cognitive abilities relating to verbal skills and spatial awareness (Levine et al in Halpern et al, 2007), the extent to which nature influences behaviour beyond this is difficult to quantify as 'it is extremely difficult to separate biological influences from environmental ones because the two influences are reciprocal [and] it is important to keep in mind the fact that the environment also shapes the brain' (Halpern 2007:3). Despite Halpern's assertion that there is 'no data regarding brain structure or function to suggest that boys and girls learn differently' (ibid: 30), these ideas have been the focus of intervention strategies for boys in school and have often led to a stereotypical approach in which it is suggested that boys can be encouraged to read through tapping into their interest in sport or by adopting a more practical rather than print based approach (Martino, 2008b, Books for Boys, 2010).

Other physical reasons are also given for the behaviour of boys such as hormones and the links made between testosterone and aggressive, energetic or boisterous behaviour, (Biddulph, 2003). This view is described by Epstein et al (1998) as a 'boys will be boys' attitude which can often sympathise with the inherent need for boys to express their masculinity through fighting and aggressive behaviour. However, as with the idea of brain function, it is difficult to separate whether testosterone influences behaviour or whether aggression actively stimulates its

production in the body (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). In his recent review of the research, Lloyd (2011) asserts that there is no evidence to prove a causal relationship between testosterone and male behaviour. Notions of essential biological difference have also been rejected by Martino and Kehler (2007) who argue that they only serve to accommodate traditional notions of masculinity rather than challenging them and therefore compound stereotypes which claim that boys choose not to indulge in more passive activities such as reading because it is not inherently in their nature to do so. Approaches such as these also tend to neglect the evidence that not all boys under-perform in literacy; when class and ethnicity are considered, white middle class boys outperform black, working class girls as well as matching their female counterparts at the highest scores in advanced level exams (Ofsted, 2009). Skelton and Francis argue that approaches which view boys as a homogenous group are also unhelpful in failing to recognise masculinity as 'a social construction...a consequence of the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, social class [and] sexuality.' (2011a:459).

Despite scholars who contest that behaviour is biologically determined, the impact that these essentialist ideas have on pedagogical practice cannot be underestimated and the extent to which they permeate professional discourse is reflected in much of the literature designed for educators. In a document produced by the Department for Education and Skills (Younger and Warrington, 2005), many of the pedagogical approaches introduced by schools to engage boys



reflect the view that they require more physical activity. Kinaesthetic learning is included in suggested strategies as well as the need for greater risk taking by teachers in using practical and physical activities. Boys are spoken of as requiring immediate feedback and praise so that the use of companionable writing is more suited to their needs with response partners to facilitate this. The need for pace and structure is also highlighted along with immediate plenary feedback and a greater use of ICT. In the Boys Commission Report (Literacy Trust, 2012), Phil Jarrett, the National Adviser for English at Ofsted, argues that boys need to feel that 'English as a subject is active, practical and productive'. He also claims that boys are turned off the school curriculum as they tend to read different books to girls, preferring non-fiction such as newspapers and biographies; libraries, he concludes, are stocked with far too much fiction.

#### ***2.4.2 The 'problem' with women***

An important theme in the discussion of boys and their underperformance in literacy has been that of the role of women in education. Indeed, some of the interventions seeking to redress the discrepancy in achievement have been framed around the notion of the 'problem' of women and their lack of understanding of the requirements of males. Schools, where often the majority of staff are female, are perceived as engendering routines and practices which

favour girls so that boys are being disadvantaged by a 'feminised' education system. Many solutions offered which are based on this premise thus reinforce the view of boys as a homogenous group; a view which is contrary to this study and its positioning of masculinity as a dynamic process. This view of the 'problem' of women also feeds into the essentialist argument that boys have innate qualities which necessitate a different style of teaching which again, focuses on masculinity as fixed. The problem solving approach is therefore to view teachers as needing to respond to gendered learning styles rather than exploring how schools themselves are 'masculinity making devices' (Connell, 1989:291) as a response to how gender based discrepancies might be addressed. It could be argued that such ingrained views have permeated the discourse surrounding the education system to such an extent that these still prevail.

## **2.5 The feminisation of school**

The feminist researchers of the 70s and 80s not only highlighted the experience of girls at school but also formed part of the struggle on behalf of women working in education and their professional aspirations. Consequently, women were seen moving into more positions of power such as that of Head Teacher as well as comprising much of the workforce within schools. At the same time the idea was challenged that the teaching of younger children was women's work, an idea

rooted in nineteenth century ideologies of manliness, which meant that the only men in such positions were often public school students who had stayed to teach in those schools. The lack of men in primary schools, was therefore the focus of feminist educators who sought to benefit pupils by breaking down the barriers of what were seen to be traditional roles. It was argued that men should be seen by children at an early age to be teaching in a primary setting to eradicate the idea of child care as being women's work (Browne and France, 1986). It was also hoped that, in doing this, it might also result in more value being placed upon early years education which was often viewed as being of a lower status than teaching at secondary level. Whilst for the first time the absence of men in primary school teaching was scrutinized, the role of women in delivering early years education was not initially viewed as a cause for concern or detrimental to pupils. However, more recently, the idea that primary schools are still largely staffed by women has been highlighted as an issue and it has been argued that it places boys at a disadvantage. One of the ideas informing this government position is the link which is made between 'laddish culture' and learning and the need to tackle this by introducing male role models to develop alternative forms of masculinity (Skelton, 2012, Brownhill, 2014). This was seen in the 'Reading Champions' initiative (2004) which celebrated positive male role models for reading in order to encourage boys in their literacy, although many of these were sporting heroes, in particular, footballers. Mentors to facilitate engagement were also encouraged in the document 'Raising Boys Achievement' (Younger and Warrington, 2005) as a strategy for success.

In tandem there has been a growing reaction to the 'feminism of education' (Miller 1996, Epstein et al. 1998). This idea is linked to essentialist views in that it takes for granted that there are fundamental differences between men and women and posits the idea that boys are disadvantaged by female teachers who may not be able to accommodate or understand their learning styles and hence, a range of literature has been provided with suggestions and tips on how to make learning more 'boy-friendly' by building in elements of competition and accepting boys' needs for adventure and action (Hannan, 1999). Strategies focusing on literacy offered by Ofsted are the inclusion of 'boy-friendly texts' and the need to reflect on how good results by boys have been achieved such as that of one teacher 'who evaluated her teaching and 'reach[ed] a tentative conclusion that she teaches language in a 'scientific' way' (2003:22). Other initiatives also point to a view, at government level, that boys and girls inherently learn in different ways such as the pilot by Ofsted of the single sex classroom.

Teaching materials have also been criticized as being too 'girl-friendly' and advice has been offered such as that of Bleach (1998a) that book covers should show males as central characters. Initiatives such as 'Boys into Books' implemented by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2008 demonstrate the commonly held perception within education that boys have specific interests which are not sufficiently catered for by the current curriculum. This is echoed in the

Boys' Commission Report (2012) who argue that schools need to teach a greater range of texts which are more suited to the needs of boys.

However, criticism of reading materials for not being 'boy-friendly' is somewhat confusing considering that in the early stages of literacy learning, school reading scheme books are arguably biased towards them in terms of inclusion. A study of early reading schemes by Baker and Freebody (1989) revealed that they contained more boys as 'social actors' (Van Leeuwen, 2008) who were more likely to appear in a story as a single character whilst girls were equally likely to appear singly or with other girls. Boys were also much more likely to be protagonists and where more than one social actor was included were generally introduced first. Even in modern reading schemes such as the Oxford Reading Tree, an analysis has shown that male participants are 'numerically dominant in material, verbal and relational-attributive processes' (Wharton, 2005:244).

An interesting point to note in the early reading books offered to children is that 'they provide ....a definition of what their identities, interests and attitudes and experiences are conventionally deemed to be' (Baker and Freebody, 1989:47) and therefore contribute to the construction of gender identity; 'fathers *paint, pump, fix, drive* (cars), *water* (gardens), mothers *dress, hug* and *kiss* (children). Girls tend to like animals whilst boys tend to like inanimate objects.....mothers are firmly located in emotion-related activities.' (Sutherland, 2011:124). Considering this, it might be possible that early reading books contribute to a notion of masculinity which

rejects emotional expression and response as feminised practice and results in some boys identifying school based literacy as unmasculine as it involves self-disclosure and empathetic response (Hunter, 1988, Gilbert, 1989). Alloway and Gilbert (2010) describe the 'truly literate subject' as one 'who is able to lay bare the soul: to engage in literacy practices that describe feelings and emotions and which locate the reader/writer as a sensitive and aesthetic subject who derives pleasure from print and literary expression' (2010:55). The early reading schemes may, therefore, help to construct this as undesirable for boys whilst at the same time demanding 'personalized expression and response' to the same texts.

Other complaints about feminised education centre around the idea that there are not enough male teachers and this is particularly pertinent in primary schools – an idea which Government Policy tried to address in 2007 via the Training and Development Agency who stressed the importance of male primary school teachers as role models. However, despite claims to the contrary, there appears to be little evidence to suggest this makes a difference in achievement (Skelton, 2001, 2003, Helbig, 2012, Brownhill, 2014). Connolly also warns that the unease about women teaching boys creates a culture of blame and also 'constructs the idea that the achievements of boys and girls are linked [so] that one group cannot succeed unless at the expense of the other' (2004:43). Such assertions imply that feminism has created a bias towards the privileging of girls (Gurian, 1998) rather than acknowledging its role in striving for equality. Furthermore, the building of a curriculum around what is girl-friendly/boy-friendly does little to challenge

stereotypes but rather embeds and accepts as inevitable, behaviours which are often linked to hegemonic forms of masculinity which may be a root cause of poor academic performance. Specifically, it defines some skills such as expressive emotional response as feminine and seeks to work round this for boys rather than challenging its rejection.

## **2.6 Failing Schools**

A further discourse identified by both Connolly (2004) and Epstein et al. (1998) is that of boys being failed by the poor quality of schooling with the latter identifying how this may emphasise the experience of boys rather than girls by making links between hegemonic masculinity and the military metaphors used to express these ideas such as 'targets', 'hit squads' and 'action zones' (1998:8)

A second report offered by Ofsted in 2003 attempted to outline how an improvement for boys in their academic achievement might be managed by encouraging 'extra-curricular activities' and 'a fair-minded approach to discipline' as well as commenting that 'boys are rather less inclined than girls to learn from indifferent teaching' (2003:3). In these and other summative comments there is a clear suggestion, once again, that boys inevitably require more discipline because of an innate boisterous nature and that the achievement of boys is not necessarily

linked to ability but rather their lack of engagement with traditional paper-based activities and with literature and reading in particular.

As with the idea of the feminisation of school, the notion that the rejection of some activities is 'natural' and that boys are less able to overcome indifferent teaching posits them as victims of the system rather than questioning or challenging behaviour. The 2003 Ofsted report, whilst acknowledging that not all boys and girls behave in the same way, nonetheless offers numerous directives on the gender differentiated teaching required: 'Boys tend to respond well to teachers who set clear limits and high expectations, direct work strongly...use humour and reward good work' (2003:3). The idea of the different learning styles is clearly evidenced in phrases such as the need for 'planning activities that encourage boys and girls to learn from each other.' Unlike girls, boys are presented as needing more individual attention, assertive discipline and praise and 'whilst girls often manage to learn despite lacklustre teaching, the matter may be more critical for boys' (2003:19). This is firmly linked to their inability to control their disruptive natures so that this behaviour is viewed through the lens of the failure of the teacher to engage them. As with the argument of the numerical dominance of women teachers, boys are positioned as needing role models and 'performed better with teachers whom they rated highly...as one model of a teacher being seen as 'top boy' (ibid:19). Here, as in the argument of the feminised school, it is implied that boys need role models and that these should, ideally, be male.



## **2.7 The impact of the crisis of masculinity on policy and practice**

The debate which has arisen from apparent discrepancies in performance between boys and girls has caused such a tide of concern that this is now frequently framed in terms of a 'crisis of masculinity' (Lingard, 2003). However, the first section of this chapter has argued that this commonly held perception is not entirely due to national trends in educational achievement but is perhaps also informed by the significant erosion of traditional patterns of employment and a change in social relationships and traditional gender roles. These changes have given rise to what are often termed 'backlash politics' (Skelton, 2001) which view feminism as partly responsible for the resulting insecurity faced by men who are in an increasingly competitive jobs market. This is a discourse in which the focus on improving the discrepancies in performance by girls and boys has gone 'too far' and has resulted in a situation where schooling is 'feminised', being based on the needs of girls and designed for them to succeed to the detriment of boys (Pollack, 1998, Moir and Moir, 1999).

The first section of the literature review demonstrates how this entrenched binary view of gender has had a pervasive influence on policy decisions so that practice based recommendations for solving boys' underachievement have often been grounded in a very generalised and essentialist view of masculinity. Hence, within pedagogical practice, there have been a range of suggestions to address the

underachievement by boys which place them in one homogenous group, a construct which 'essentializes male-female difference and ignores difference and exclusion within the gender category' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:836).

Scholarly conversation, however, has often taken the approach of recognising gender as socially constructed and explores the effect of this on both academic engagement and activities such as reading (Alloway, 2007, Millard, 2010, Love & Hamston, 2005, 2010, Skelton, 2012). They have argued that gender is an expression of learned behaviours, 'a complex performance, enacted within what are deemed to be culturally sanctioned roles' (Disenhaus, 2015:2). This is a view which highlights the need to explore how the construction of masculinity affects literacy performance and engagement rather than taking a generalised approach to boys which can lead to ineffective or even harmful 'solutions'. Beyond this, other factors in achievement have entered the literacy debate such as the effect of the intersection of class and ethnicity which, alongside gender, impact significantly on learning outcomes. Further issues have also been raised as to how literacy competencies are actually measured (Alloway, 1997, Goddard, 2005). The next section of the literature review therefore moves on to discuss the ways in which the social construction of masculinity has been said to impact upon education as well as including a discussion of the role of both family life and social class so that influences at play which work together to create the literate individual can be seen in context.

## **2.8 The shaping of the literate individual**

The issue of boys and achievement in literacy is complex and there are many influences which contribute to the shaping of the literate individual; the influence of family, expectations of formal education and the creation of masculine identities in modern male youth culture. It is these considerations which have caused a shift in the questions which are asked when studying the language skills of boys and girls so that rather than trying to define how they use language it is a matter of investigating the linguistic resources that they employ to represent themselves (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003)

No doubt this change in how gender is viewed has been assisted by the growing awareness in society of issues such as intersex babies and of those who are transgendered. Knight (1992) clearly demonstrates the pressures that are brought into play to construct a gender identity. In her article on original gender interference in transsexuals' speech Knight claims that interference in a male-to-female transsexual usually assumes the form of displaying knowledge atypical of the target gender, the style of being assertive or the assumption about the purpose of communication. Although Knight seeks to highlight the difference in behaviour between genders and how arduous the reconstruction process is (and the reasons for this) non-the-less she demonstrates that the construction of a gender identity is a dynamic process. Perhaps an unintended strand which appears in her article is

that the construction of a gender identity is also now subject to relatively limited speech-role expectations. This may be the result of the breaking down of traditional male and female roles over the years so that studies on the differences between male and female language, which have hinged on social differentiation of gender roles and division of labour, have been swept away by a rapidly changing society in which those clear cut roles have been eroded. Despite calls by materialists to recognise the essential differences between boys and girls educationally in terms of literacy, they can no longer simply be divided into two homogenous groups without taking into consideration a vast array of other influences at play such as culture, ethnicity, age, and sexuality.

Boys negotiate a variety of contexts including both school and the family and each of these offer ways for them to construct their masculinity as they build a sense of the societal boundaries placed upon them in terms of what is deemed as both acceptable and desirable. Skelton, (2001) argues that the construction of gender roles are reinforced by the communities of practice enacted both in the school environment and in the home. This idea of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) has resulted in an increased focus on how different masculinities are shaped and the interrelation between gender and other factors such as class and ethnicity. The different ways of performing masculinity in the school environment are often embedded by teachers who not only make gender a central element of identity for their pupils but also play an essential role in mediating given texts and tasks. This is explored in Sutherland's (2000) article, 'Teacher Talk around the

Text' which explores how it is impossible to predict the effect of any teaching materials or texts as they are mediated by a teacher who embeds them with his or her own ideas. Furthermore, teachers also bring their own ideas of gender stereotypes to the classroom; this is often seen in the ingrained views of girls as having superior verbal and communication skills and thus being more interested in reading as well as the attributing of performance to girls' hard work as opposed to boys' natural ability. There is also the consistent labelling and acceptance of the 'lazy boy' (Walkerdine 1989).

The complex nature of how boys create and identify themselves and others is also seen in studies by Martino (1999) and his identification of 'party animals and poofers' or Mac an Ghail's (1994) study of the 'macho lads' and 'the academic achievers', both of which demonstrate the influence of heteronormative values which idealise boys as active, rebellious and sexually aggressive and show the mechanisms of control by which peers ensure that only certain options are available to boys in 'packaging' their identity and how this is influenced by wider 'prevailing discourses' (Francis, 1999). In particular, the practice of 'picking on' at school shows the prominent role which school plays in the construction of identity (Skelton, 2000).

The connection between literacy engagement and the social construction of masculinity is highlighted in the study by Alloway and Gilbert (1997) who noted that the dictates of heteronormative masculinity often conflict with the

requirements of practices which shape the literate individual. This is largely due to being required to engage in passive practices which are often constructed as 'feminine' including responses to texts that demand self-examination, self-disclosure and creative expressions of feeling. The study by Martino also illustrates this, with one of his participants claiming that, 'English is more suited to girls because it's not the way guys think....therefore I don't particularly like the subject. I hope you aren't offended by this but most guys who like English are faggots' (2010:357). Martino describes this as a form of 'protest masculinity' (1999:251) where boys are reluctant to be seen as engaging with formal education, an idea echoed by Brozo (2005, 2014) who claims that boys are reluctant to be seen as readers due to negative labelling and recrimination from peers who associate literacy with 'nerds' who are simply not 'cool'.

## **2.9 The influence of family and social class**

One of the most disturbing and persistent aspects of the literacy gap is the disparity based on socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is not only necessary to look at how boys engage with literacy in terms of the construction of their masculinity but also to acknowledge other factors which are brought to bear in order to understand the choices they are able to make. Just as it is necessary to explore the social pressures on boys to conform to desirable modern constructions

of masculinity, so too it is essential to parse other influencing factors on academic performance, as recognising these variables helps in understanding how boys shape their personal identity beyond gender.

As discussed by Whitmire (2010), students' literacy achievements depend on socioeconomic status and ethnicity as well as gender. Inequalities brought about by family life as explored by Lareau (2011) in the USA, demonstrate the powerful effects of cultural and social practices on children's experiences of schooling. In the British context also, one of the more influential variables in the creation of personal identity is that of class and the inequality of attainment based on this has long since been established. Indeed, Edgell (1993, in Archer et.al, 2003:5) suggests that social class is 'the most widely used concept' in the discussion of inequalities in education and it is recognised as a central theme in research pointing to the perpetuation of disadvantage. Although the study was carried out against a somewhat different economic landscape to that of the new millennium, Willis's 'Learning to Labour', (1977) highlighted how the reproduction of experiences and customs plays a key part in the shaping of boys' futures and also demonstrated how working class masculinities can differ from those of other social backgrounds.

The importance of the interplay between school and family is also argued by sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, whose concept of cultural capital explains why economic obstacles alone are 'not sufficient to explain disparities in the

educational attainment of children from different social classes' (Bourdieu, 1977:8). For Bourdieu, success in education begins in the early years when knowledge, language and culture are absorbed within the family setting. Here, the economic and physical constraints encountered by working class families can mean that their children also lack some knowledge of education systems which subsequently leads to them being disadvantaged compared to middle class families who have a greater access to resources; both material and knowledge based. Maguire et al found that for middle class families, increased social and knowledge resources meant that 'choice is presented as natural, orderly, clear-cut, almost beyond question, unlike the chancey, uncertain process many working class students are caught up in' (2000:5). Thus children are disadvantaged by arriving in a school setting which has certain cultural values which may already have been learned in some families but not in others.

Bourdieu (1986) asserted that cultural capital exists in various forms including personal investment in learning and the education system and associated objects which are seen as having a cultural value such as books, art and instruments. This culture is directly implicated in the creation of inequality and educational institutions therefore play a part in embedding cultural capital inherited from the family rather than addressing it for children who enter school with few of the required dispositions and competencies. For example, Hart and Risley (1995) showed that middle class children often have larger vocabularies upon entering formal education and these are interpreted by teachers as a measure of



intelligence and effort rather than being due to a family environment. The importance of this can be seen in Government backed initiatives for encouraging literacy, most of which seek to address the discrepancies in the access that children have to activities, such as reading, which are valued in the school setting (Close, 2001). Government funded schemes such as 'BookStart', 'the Family Reading Campaign' and 'Reading Year' all focus on children's out of school learning experiences and shared family learning. These schemes appear to have resulted in some success and thus do support Bourdieu's assertions about the impact of family learned cultural habits and dispositions. In the follow up study of the pilot for the BookStart Scheme in Birmingham it was concluded that the original families involved had maintained a long term enthusiasm for books and sharing texts as a family (Wade and Moore, 1993). Following research carried out by Arnold and Whitehurst (1994) it was also suggested that such schemes result in a lifelong positive attitude towards books and literature amongst the children involved.

This focus on reading shows how paper-based literacy activities are culturally valued on both a personal and societal level and Whitehead (2010:xiv) describes how 'early language and literacy learning are often seen as patterns or 'models' for a great range of human learning strategies and achievements'. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) also suggest that a link between an engagement with literacy and expectations for professional success post school is often made by boys who are more socioeconomically privileged who come to view literacy as an important

means to a desired end. The drive to encourage reading within the family and the importance placed upon achievement in paper-based literacy activities in schools emphasises the extent to which an individual's cultural capital is linked to the acquisition of such competencies. As McKenzie claims, 'the greater the degree of cultural capital individuals possess, the more successful they will be in the educational system' (2001:50) and it is clear therefore that the habitus of formal education demands some investment in the practice of reading and an engagement with literacy.

Bourdieu, however, has been criticised in being too deterministic in his idea that values are 'hereditary' and whilst the notion of cultural capital is useful in terms of analysing how and why literacy and literature are so significant in education and why some children fail, it does not explain why some children do not; it also does not fully explain any gender divide in academic performance. In offering the argument that family habitus is an essential determiner in shaping futures the mystery remains as to why, despite initiatives in which parents participate and do encourage their children to read, and where this does work in the early years, some boys still do not value reading as a leisure activity later in their education. In particular, the puzzling aspect to the idea of cultural capital is that in middle class families where the value of reading is reinforced, many boys still show a reluctance to engage with paper-based literacy activities (Love and Hamston, 2010, Millard, 2010).

In their research, carried out in Australia, Love and Hamston, (2003, 2010) argue that even adolescent boys who come from highly educated and middle-class backgrounds are still more likely than girls to 'resist appropriating family reading dispositions which privilege print-based materials' (2003:161). Further support for this phenomena comes from Martino (2003) who described a study of middle-class boys who did not engage with literacy in school whilst being supported by their parents out of school. Whilst cultural capital was deployed effectively by these parents and offered the boys an advantage perhaps not available to boys from a different socioeconomic background, there was still a disparity between the connection with out of school literacy practices with those in school. In 2010, Love and Hamston also suggested that the 'able but chooses not to' reading disposition is created by the juggling of family cultural capital with modern male youth culture.

## **2.10 Measuring competencies**

A further issue in exploring boys' literacy has been the measuring of competency and the viewing of this purely through the lens of school based activities. This is an idea which resonates with research carried out by Goddard (2003) who suggests that far from lagging behind girls in language, literacy and creativity, that boys show a great deal of proficiency in mediums which are not paper-based. In looking at conversations by boys using technology such as MSM she found that

there appeared to be no gender difference in self-expression and that boys demonstrated a wealth of creativity in their use of language. Alloway (2007) also noted that achievement data are generally based on printed texts which gives a skewed view of the literacy proficiency of boys and suggests that the discrepancy in success in non-print activities lies in that they 'do not clash with boys'...desire to take up positions as masculine subjects' (2007:590). Millard (2010) has also asserted that the reason for 'failing boys' does not lie in boys' lack of ability but in the role of school curriculum in promoting particular versions of literacy and also highlights boys' proficiency in multimedia based literacy tasks. Millard asserts that 'the image of the reader in society is shown to be closely linked to a construct of a passive feminine identity, which is particularly resistant to change' (2010:42). She also comments that even in current family literacy programmes the influence is usually maternal which reinforces the idea of literacy as 'women's work'. There is a suggestion then that boys may not have rejected literacy but simply certain paper-based mediums which are viewed as feminine.

## **2.11 Summary**

This chapter looked at the key debates in literature surrounding boys and literacy and how fears of a gendered gap in achievement may be linked to wider concerns about the erosion of traditional roles, both in family and working life. Links were

made to this mindset and an ongoing and pervasive binary view of gender which, it argues, has influenced pedagogical policy and practice.

The literature review also explored the factors which contribute to the shaping of the literate individual so that as well as considering the construction of masculinity which is fundamental to this study, a range of influences at work are acknowledged in order to avoid a potentially over-simplified understanding of the literacy gap based on gender alone. These include social class, family culture and even the defining of what literacy is and how competency is measured. For the purposes of this study it was necessary to consider these many other variables so they could be reflected upon when selecting both the school and the participants for this study.

## **Chapter 3: Multiple Masculinities: Social Construction, Performance and Maintaining the Gender Order**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the theoretical background and history of the study of masculinities in order to explain the position taken that gender is a construct developed dynamically through social interaction. To this end, both materialist and post structuralist perspectives of gender are outlined, as it is recognised that whilst gender may be subjective and performative, young boys are defined and often constrained in the choices they make by the bodies they inhabit. Materialist ideas are, therefore, outlined of what it is to be a boy in terms of expectations of behaviour or physique. This is relevant for any study of boys within the modern day context where there are paradoxical ideas which point towards a new, more flexible masculinity (Aboum 2013, Gee 2013) which, at the same time, is set against a perceived 'crisis of masculinity' and the call for a return to being 'real men' (Bly, 1990). As the position taken points to the possibility of multiple constructions of masculinity, it is also argued here that the concept of hegemony is still essential to the study. Therefore, during the first section which outlines theoretical approaches to masculinity, a discussion is also presented of the criticisms and difficulties of using such as concept and how these can be resolved.

For young children, much of their time is spent in the school environment and so the second section of this chapter specifically explores how educational establishments can contribute to the socialisation of genders so that different behaviours in boys and girls are valued and reinforced. This is presented so that the context of the study is placed firmly in the primary school environment and its influence in shaping a gendered identity is acknowledged. In the final section, the creation of gender roles through discourse is explained using Foucault's ideas of how social interaction works to shape ideas of what it is to be a boy.

### **3.2 Theoretical approaches to masculinity**

This section argues that approaches to the study of masculinities are largely a result of the emergence of feminism and its scrutiny of the gendered nature of society. Whilst the response to feminist research has not always been positive, many of the subsequent studies of masculinity are pro-feminist in approach in their acceptance of patterns of male domination (Connell, 1987, 2005, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003, Seidler, 2007). This is not only explored from the perspective of the subjugation of women but considers the power relations amongst men themselves, both of which are often determined by structural determinants which are evident in materialist ideas of what it is to be a man. This

study therefore draws on feminist-informed theories in addition to materialist positions of masculinity.

### ***3.2.1 Gender – old roles and modern expectations***

The study of gender is one which has expanded rapidly in recent decades largely developed by women writing from a feminist perspective on the female experience. These first critiques of gender role theory began in the mid-1980s informed by second wave feminism and focused on the social constructionist aspects of gender. Societal institutions such as education were cited as mechanisms for reproducing gender inequalities but debate was largely focused on how it disadvantaged girls and, particularly in the case of school, the concern about their under-representation in key subjects within the curriculum. These contributions by feminist-informed theorists resulted in the interrogation of the concept of femininity and began to challenge long held dichotomies concerning the binary nature of men and women. Instead, theoretical perspectives were offered which proposed the view that gender is performative and actualised through a series of repetitive performances (Butler, 2004, 2007) and that, as asserted by Mary Crawford (1995), 'gender' would be better perceived as a verb; as something which is enacted rather than something we are. This concept of gender as socially constructed, described by Butler (1990) as 'girling' and 'boying', acknowledges the



fluid and contradictory nature of what it is to be gendered and how individual productions can differ. Hence the theoretical trend is now to refer to femininities and masculinities in the plural, an idea which is essential to this study in acknowledging the multiple masculinities which are available to men and boys in the post-modern age.

The second wave feminist exploration of the female experience (Spender & Sarah, 1980, Deem, 1980, Weiner, 1985) resulted in revealing the dynamics of the creation of gender and, despite its focus on women, also made masculinity visible. For in interrogating and exploring precisely how women were disadvantaged in society it was also necessary to turn the spotlight on the role of men as a subjugating force. Whilst this problematizing of the role of men was initially taken up by feminists within their analyses of women, the concept of masculinities was then explored as a primary focus by a number of researchers (Connell 1987, 2005, Kimmel 1987, Whitehead 2002, Haywood and Mac An Ghaill, 2003).

This focus on the experience of boys as gendered beings has in more recent times shifted away from their role as a subjugating force and, instead, the problematizing of the role of men has given way to a new discourse of the challenge of being a man of the modern age. Certainly the response to the achievements of the feminist movement has not all been positive. Instead, in certain forums, it has given rise to an ongoing discourse which laments the breakdown of strongly patriarchal masculinities and their traditional role. The move from the male provider to the male carer has not been an easy one and has resulted in a

backlash from some who advocate a return of 'real' men (Bly, 1990). This has led to the paradoxical situation where despite the cultural and discursive plurality in the practices of men, there is still a limited vision of this plurality and it is therefore hard to reconcile material positions and culture.

For young boys then, the construction of the social and masculine self is a complex notion due to tensions between old roles and modern expectations which can often be somewhat contradictory. This can involve occupying different positions in different spheres of social life and their 'practices and identities... taking on multiple, hybrid, even paradoxical forms, as they seek to find a new place' (Aboum, 2013:5). However, whilst this has led to 'male power' being enacted according to the demands of any given circumstance, they are still related to positions within a power structure and this, as a young male, often uses a very traditional model of what it is to be a 'real man'. This is seen in Paetcher's research into 'tomboy' identities where the 'things that boys do' include winning playground football games, getting into trouble and fighting (2007) all of which clearly show an emphasis on physical prowess. Perhaps one of the best examples of the hold that older more traditional views of masculinity still have can be witnessed in the celebration of modern icons such as David Beckham, whose portrayal in the media as caring father and husband is still balanced by his outstanding athleticism, muscular physique and aggression on the pitch. Whilst his 'flexible' masculinity may 'extend the boundaries of gender, bend the codes of masculinity, and diversify the available options of masculinity' (Gee, 2013:1) there

is no doubt that a large part of his appeal is his heteronormative and hypermasculine physique.

In acknowledging that the body is central to identity, although this may also be socially constructed as well as materially given, this chapter argues that there is a need not only to recognize the tensions between materialist and post-structural perspectives but to draw on both in analyzing masculinities and how they are constructed by the individual.

### **3.2.2 *The male body***

According to Shilling (2003), the male body has, until relatively recently, been largely ignored except for examinations which highlight the relationship between physicality and power (Connell, 1995, Peterson, 1998). Therefore, whilst feminists have made links between the male body and dominance (Tong, 1998), embodiment has not featured significantly in pro-feminist accounts of masculinities (Whitehead, 2002, Stephens & Lorentzen, 2007). Poststructuralist theorists such as Butler (1990) question the very existence of the corporeal body and posit that bodily identifications with gender are artificial and constructed only through prevailing discourses. However, the issue of the body is important to this study as whilst epistemological assumptions are made about the social construction of

gender, it is still recognised that the body is central to identity and so an element of materialism is needed in the conceptualisation of what it is to be a boy. Whilst the construction of gender may be 'fluid' it is accepted that some of the prevailing discourses which boys are subject to are positioned peripherally to adult communities of masculinity practice (Paechter, 2007) which dictate 'who or what is 'allowed' to count as masculine' (Paechter, 2011:235). Consequently, all of the boys in this study, being a product of their environment and culture, are subject to various kinds of 'policing' to ensure they choose legitimised forms of masculinity as dictated by the norm- enforcing influence of the media, sport and various icons of popular culture which point towards the ideal male physique. It is therefore important to acknowledge a strongly embodied account of gender which recognises that the body itself, as argued by Peterson (1998), is socially constructed as well as materially given.

Old ideas of biological determinism or 'hardwiring' may no longer stand up to scrutiny (Connell, 2005) but the metaphors they have created still influence our perception and the ideal of the strong, athletic, muscular, male body still dominates popular culture. This is particularly relevant to younger boys as, arguably, a great deal of the social interaction experienced by them now occurs at the helm of the media which plays an ever increasingly important role in lives and hence, in the creating, maintaining and circulating of hegemonic male stereotypes. Gee (2013) points out that whilst it appears that the media seems to allow for a greater number of contemporary alternatives for male identities these can often be

‘constructed to adapt to the ever-changing climate of consumer capitalism’ and may not necessarily be open to all men, as demonstrated in the widely reported incident of David Beckham wearing a ‘skirt’. The media therefore ‘whilst appearing to accommodate a range of masculinities, also plays a key role in restricting and channelling how masculinity is experienced and performed’ (2013:3).

As the role of the media’s influence becomes more comprehensive, young boys are often subjected to hypermasculine norms through popular games such as ‘Call of Duty’. This is particularly pertinent for boys such as the ones participating in this study, who have grown up against a backdrop of unrest in the Middle East as the news coverage becomes increasingly graphic and is more easily accessible via YouTube. Soldiering is often presented as exciting or heroic and this perpetuates the popular identification between war and masculinity. Morgan (1994) contends that the focus on the heroic soldier centres largely around the body, both its control and its surrendering, and offers a model where victory is dependent on greater physical stamina and prowess than the enemy. In order to achieve this, men subject themselves to a regime of regulation which is focussed on extreme physical training but also the subjugation of the body to military regulation which includes rigorous personal grooming and uniform. This model is seen in several recent reality shows where young men have been seen to achieve ‘manhood’ or ‘turn their lives around’ by being subjected to the regime of national service or being sent to the East to be initiated into the world of martial arts; their heads are shaved, their clothes are taken and a physical regime is imposed. This

is a stark contrast to similar modern programmes showing women having their lives changed by being offered a 'make-over'.

Seidler (2007) contends that the idea that men need to prove their masculinity by showing they can endure pain is rooted in the early Christian distain for the body but is now reproduced in the postmodern gym culture which offers a forum where men are able to demonstrate physical endurance, thus confirming their superiority over other men. Such a hierarchy is also outlined by Theberge (1991) who describes the disciplinary regulation of the body which is achieved through participation in sport; a focus which is perhaps driven by the decrease in jobs where it is possible to prove one's masculinity through hard toil and physical endurance. These body-reflexive practices are described by Connell as symbolic through which 'more than individual lives are formed: a social world is formed' (2000:26) and could account for the global rise of the use of competitive sport as a dominant symbol of hegemonic masculinity whilst at the same time, in the world of business, the model appears to be moving towards a similarly competitive and target driven individual. Through sport, Sabo (1994) argues that boys are taught to conform to the 'pain principle'; socialisation which teaches them to ignore their own physical discomfort for fear of being labelled as not being 'manly' enough. Indeed, the world of sport is one in which 'homophobia polices the boundaries of acceptable masculine practices' (Messner in Kimmel, 2005:317) and engenders a culture of displays of physical dominance and oppression of the weak, in particular women and gay men (Messner, 2001). It could also be argued that the 'locker

room' culture described by Messner (2005, 2007), of initiations, laddish behaviour and bravado is now seen in wider popular culture and is reflected in the media through reality shows such as 'Geordie Shore' and 'the Valleys.'

In contemporary culture, boys are bombarded with representations of the male physique, particularly through advertising, which are often exaggerated examples of dominant male stereotypes. The impact of this cannot be underestimated as, according to Patterson and Elliot (2002:231), 'the negotiation and renegotiation of male identities is made all the more possible by the increasing visualisation of male bodies in advertising and the media'. Boys are often viewed as members of brand communities which are driven by sports heroes who are regarded as the epitome of masculinity because they are 'strong, tough, handsome, competitive, and dating or married to the most desirable women' (Griffin, 1998:25).

'Body-reflexive practices, like all practices, are governed by, and constitute, social structures' (Connell 2000:59) and the approach of exploring the materiality of the male body therefore offers a framework for understanding the social embodiment of masculinities. In this study it is certainly a useful framework for understanding the pressures brought to bear on young boys and the choices they are able to make. For certain body-reflexive practices construct particular gender identities and therefore there is a value in drawing on both materialist and poststructuralist accounts in order to explore how male identities in younger boys are negotiated.

### **3.2.3 *The emotional male***

As well as considering the pressures upon young boys to adapt and use their bodies in a way which is deemed to be socially desirable, it is also necessary to acknowledge the boundaries which are set for them in terms of the expression of emotion and how these are currently evolving in the face of modern culture. This is relevant to this investigation in that the study of literacy is one in which a personal expressive response is often required and so, in order to understand how this may be negotiated by younger boys, this section addresses the different and often contradictory messages that they are subject to in the face of changing gender roles.

Mac An Ghaill (1994) and Martino (1995) argue that in an educational setting, certain teacher ideologies which are a product of socially conditioned expectations, could emphasise and perpetuate rational, traditional forms of masculinity and help to prejudice boys against school subjects which could be linked to emotionality. Paradoxically, however, emotions and emotional intelligence are now being recognised as being essential for the work environment (Kerfoot, 2001) and the idea of men as 'hugely stoical, quiet, dignified.....an uncommunicative man who does not play around with his words...an invulnerable, unfeeling masculinity (Beynon, 2002:68) may no longer be appropriate in a



workplace which calls for an 'emotional engagement' with employees in order to encourage greater productivity. Thus, this contemporary picture of life presents the complexities which must be engaged with by young boys as they are prepared by school for the world of work. This dichotomy of the need for greater emotion due to the changing nature of work and family life is perhaps best exemplified in modern cultural icons who embody the ideal of the 'new man'.

As cultural icons such as Beckham represent a more 'flexible' or greater range of possibilities for masculinity, they also perhaps signal the shift in roles for men in terms of the 'hands on' father and family man which, in turn, demonstrates the acceptability of greater displays of emotion in their roles as carer. Men are expected to participate in family life; they go to antenatal classes, they attend the birth and their place in the early stages of their children's lives is increasingly recognised in the calls to offer more extensive and flexible paternity leave. It is also true to say that modern women are more likely to expect men to be more present in their relationships rather than adhering to a traditional view of the father as the bread winning, distant, authority figure of the household. Still, whilst men have taken a greater place in caring for children and despite there being an estimated 90,000 full time, stay-at-home dads (Summerskill, 2009), there is some unease at how this is perceived and the role can still engender more negative feelings of illegitimacy as a man, self-doubt and social isolation (Smith, 1998). The acceptance of men as having more emotional relationships with each other is

also recognised but at the same time somewhat derided by memes such as 'bromance'.

Despite changes in roles and the requirement for the expression of caring emotions, stereotypical masculinity still identifies with physical strength so that whilst middle class sensibilities demand more than the display of brute strength, men may feel uneasy if they are not strong enough. Toughness and aggression are often tolerated, if not actively approved of in boys and they are taught to 'stand up for themselves'. Although violence is condemned, it is often seen as a way of improving social status to be unafraid of or capable of fighting. Whether real or play, aggression is associated with masculinity and therefore relates to wider society and to its power relations. Metcalf and Humphries (1985:12) argue that the popularisation of monetary politics has played upon a particular kind of masculinity so that western governments 'sell themselves as military leaders, the leaders of fighting men, real men, not wimps or wets'. Morrison and Eardley (1985:19) contend that 'boys grow up to be wary of each other' and are taught to compete with one another at school. Thus, whilst there is a message for the need to adapt to the more emotional model of the 'new man', the contradictory message is still present that 'men don't touch, show emotions or cry. They don't let others push them around' (Harris, 1995:151).

### **3.2.4 Masculinity and power**

Connell (2005) asserts that the issue of men's power is central to any discussion of masculinity as men are afforded both status and wealth merely from the fact of being male, regardless of whether or not they consciously subscribe to the oppression of women. Therefore, as discussion surrounding gender has, so often, been associated with the justification of the monopoly of resources and power, it remains highly politicized and largely explored in the context of inequality. This is especially relevant in a modern age where concerns of inequality are no longer simply the domain of feminists as white, male, heterosexual men are discussed as a group in crisis regardless of their ongoing monopoly of status and economic resources. Whitehead describes how such a dialogue is 'paradoxically....quite attractive for such men for it posits them as victims and, thus offer[s] them a new form of validation and identity – as wounded and now under threat.' (2002:4).

The issue of men's power and the positioning of them, at the same time, as a disadvantaged group highlights how complicated masculinity is as a theoretical phenomenon. Whilst masculinity is often tied to power in both public life and the household, it is a recurring feature that the way it operates remains largely hidden which often allows it to function without challenge (Reeser, 2010). Therefore masculinity is sometimes only seen as defined by an 'other' such as women or gay men and the meaning of it made through opposition. This can clearly be seen in

the argument that boys who fail in the school environment do so due to the system having been 'feminised' by being predominantly staffed by women. Arguments which problematise such an environment point to the level of discomfort which is present when men lose power and security and are 'reduced' to the same level as women (Skelton, 2001). This highlights a very simple binary construction of feminine versus masculine where the social and cultural preference for men and masculinity is highlighted.

Whilst discussion of power is essential, it is important to remember that not all men have power or hegemony and this is particularly pertinent in studying relationships between boys, as this study does. It is also necessary for this study to consider that rather than being marginalized and excluded, some boys may be consciously resistant (Shain, 2003) rather than having failed at being in hegemonic positions. Such positions can challenge the idea of non-hegemonic constructions as 'other' as they are not necessarily subordinate. In exploring the construction of hegemony by young boys, it is important not to take on the prevailing view of the dominant group by judging alternatives negatively as failed or subordinate but to consider them from the individual's perspective. It is also necessary to consider how power may not always be only oppressive to others but also to those who wield it. As Bordieu asserts, it is possible to be 'dominated by domination' (2001:69) and Paetcher also comments that, 'being dominant is hard, continuous work, and for many children it may be a relief not to be caught up in that situation of constant mutual surveillance' (2011:234).

### **3.2.5 *Hegemonic masculinity***

One of the most important concepts in the discussion of men and power, and to this study, is that of hegemonic masculinity; one which owes much to critical structuralism and the neo-Marxist analysis of class struggle between different social entities. Originally introduced by Connell (1983), the concept was explored in her paper, 'Men's Bodies' to highlight the hierarchical framework of masculinity. Connell drew on Gramsci's understanding of class structure to develop the concept which she described as 'a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond brute power into the organisation of private life and cultural processes' (1987:184). Hegemony does not, however, according to Connell, represent the experience of all men being one of 'four patterns of masculinity in the current Western gender order which includes hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization' (1995:77). Thus, whilst it is applicable to only a minority of men its importance lies in that it is normative for a great many.

Since the introduction of the term, however, it has been criticized due to its focus on negative attributes (Jefferson, 2002) and its 'one-dimensional' approach (Peterson, 1998, Demetriou, 2001). Demetriou in particular points to two different types of hegemony; one which exercises institutionalised hierarchy over women versus 'internal hegemony' which is expressed in a hierarchy amongst men. Such

a distinction is useful for this study in making sense of how young boys define themselves as distinct from girls as well as how they assess their status amongst their peers. The concept of hegemony offers the opportunity to explore how particular constructions of masculinity are of value to young boys and what types of rewards or 'patriarchal dividends' (Connell, 2002:143) make it worth defending. As Connell asserts, hegemony is not necessarily achieved through negative or violent means but relies on coercion and often, the complicity of subordinate groups. It is, therefore, critical to consider the ways in which others, who may not be hegemonic, benefit from the gender order.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been critiqued in a number of ways, notably in trying both to define it and decide on which version might be in practice (Beasley, 2008). Its use in research has also led to concerns that it may result in an oversimplified response to the complex process of the construction of masculinity with the temptation to define fixed character types (Connell, 2000). In answer to criticisms, Connell (2005) offers a reformulation of the concept which demonstrates a more complex view of gender hierarchy with an explicit recognition of the influences of geography, privilege and power which lead to internal contradictions. The concept has also been influenced by the notion of a discursive construction of reality which suggests that 'men are not permanently committed to a particular pattern of masculinity but rather they make specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behaviour', (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: xviii). Reeser also discusses the fluidity and instability of the concept of

hegemonic masculinity and how it 'is never really simply in any one position in any relation, but often somewhere in between' (2010:14). Thus, rather than being viewed as a static identity, it is rather more fluid and unstable and can possibly only be defined against subordination and how it employs this for various ends.

This post-structuralist view of masculinity as inherently unstable could perhaps be seen as problematic in any study which focuses on hegemony with all of its tensions and contradictions. However, the critiques, as outlined above, point to problems in the *application* of the concept rather than the concept itself. I would therefore argue that, as described by Connell, this notion of a 'culturally exalted masculinity' is 'still essential' (2005:18). However, for the purposes of this study, the use of hegemony might be most effectively framed, as is masculinity itself, through its plurality. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) propose that in empirical research, three levels of hegemony can be analysed which are constructed locally, regionally and globally and each must be considered. The implication of this in school based research is not only to consider how boys construct or relate to hegemonic masculinity in face to face interaction but how both wider cultural factors and even the pressures of increasing globalisation impact upon the choices they make or are able to make.

A further pitfall in the use of the concept of hegemonic masculinity can be the focus on this to the detriment of exploring alternative ways of 'doing boy' and, in particular, to ignore how these overlap or work together to uphold the gender order

(Connell, 2008). Gottzen (2011) suggests that by recognising and exploring this interplay, a much more complex picture can emerge of how other iterations of masculinity can use hegemony for its own purposes – often in maintaining the gender order between men and women. This is pertinent in a study of young boys who, whilst they may not achieve or even want hegemonic status ‘internally’, still wish to present themselves as being distinct from girls.

For the purposes of this study, it must also be considered that the construction of masculinity, being fraught with tensions and contradictions as it is, can be exacerbated by age. Emergent masculinities may be more fluid and boys may fit into more than one ‘category’ (hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, marginalised) or move between them. Whilst this is acknowledged by Connell there is no theorising as to how this might occur. In seeking to address this issue, Bartholomaeus outlines how hegemony might be perhaps be reframed as a *discourse* of hegemonic masculinity which she describes as ‘that which is most influential in defining what is most ‘masculine’ in a given setting’ (2012:227). Such an approach is taken in this study so that hegemonic practices can be explored at a local level and this provides a useful framework for considering the very particular perspective and practices of young boys in their primary school setting. Furthermore, it allows for both Connell’s concept of hegemony and Foucault’s concept of discourse to be usefully combined to capture the fluid nature of the construction of gender. This study, therefore, also draws on Foucault’s ideas of



how the gender order is created and maintained discursively which is discussed in the next section.

### **3.3 Maintaining the gender order**

A useful framework for considering the performativity of masculinity and how its regimes of practice are created and maintained, is the body of theory developed by Foucault who describes how such structures are internally and externally policed through 'games of truth, practices of power' (cited in Martino, 2000:214). For Foucault, social interaction and its resultant discourse serves to 'transmit and produce power, it reinforces it and exposes it' (1978:100-101) and by a complex set of practices keeps certain 'rules' in circulation. Often, discourse is the system by which we perceive reality and can be a means of oppression or to maintain a specific order. The social world, expressed through language, shapes our society and therefore, to understand how gender is constructed it is necessary to see how this is achieved through discourse and power relations so that certain ideologies of what it is to be a boy can be explored.

In his study of boys at a high school in Australia, Martino (1999, 2000) found that their gendered identities were often fashioned around compulsory heterosexuality which involved the constant surveillance of both themselves and others in order to

avoid more feminine behaviours which might result in bullying from popular boys who were the chief enforcers of this regime. This was described by Martino as 'boundary maintenance work' (1999:239) and, viewed through a Foucauldian lens showed how a 'regime of normalising practices' was employed by the powerful in order to 'police gender boundaries' (ibid:219). Other studies such as that of Mac an Ghaill also highlight how to 'be a 'real boy' is publicly to be in opposition to and distance oneself from the feminine and feminized versions of masculinity' (2000:172) which also necessitates the policing of the boundaries of heterosexuality. These dominant discourses of the dual nature of male/female often act to silence other ideologies and this, in turn, helps to maintain both a 'natural' gender and social order. As suggested by Foucault, boys work to monitor not only the enactment of the masculinity of others but also of themselves. Peterson, points to the difficulties which are faced by boys who resist the pervasive desirable performances of masculinity who 'thereby enter uncertain worlds, with all the fear of rejection and the need for affirmation and support that accompany any risk taking venture' (2002:353). In order to avoid rejection, the patrolling of the gender borders can often take aggressive forms of control such as making comments which marginalize and isolate those who are not prepared to conform, or even physical violence. This was emphasised in Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli's study (2003) where a boy was heckled and abused by other boys for reading his poems out loud in class. However, an important point to acknowledge in the idea of the acceptance of male/female duality is that in a review of research by Peterson (2006) it was noted that this is not always the same for girls as it is for

boys. In numerous studies, the expectations which constrained writing choices for boys in terms of themes and topics was often considerably less rigid for girls than for boys. Both Peterson and Newkirk (2000) found that it was more acceptable for girls to take up what were considered to be 'masculine' topics whereas it was 'socially dangerous for boys to take up feminine themes' (Peterson, 2006:318). Furthermore, for boys, their status amongst their peers was often a particular consideration in the choosing of topics. In an effort to be seen to as 'masculine,' boys took greater care to avoid or to be seen to be enjoying activities which were constructed as 'feminine' which included school literacy activities. As described by Watson et al. such is the power of the discourse which creates gender roles that boys can reject school culture as they:

'become resistant to labels of failure and look for other sources of power and privilege..... The immediate gratification and status boys achieve by performing in excessively masculine ways are extremely appealing even if they lead to a life of underachievement beginning with academic failure' (2010:359)

Discourses amongst schoolboys which exalt disruptive behaviour, rebellion against authority and the objectification of women can act as a 'self worth protection strategy' (Jackson, 2002:37) which is an alternative to academic achievement, and highlights the status achieved by the maintaining of heteronormative performances of masculinity which reject feminine behaviour. Such is the power of this discourse, Martino (2000) even found instances where

this behaviour was emulated by middle-class boys who felt the need to adopt a public persona of appearing not to strive academically regardless of their ability.

Mandel and Shakeshaft suggest that early years education is a pivotal time in the construction of gender and describes how, as suggested by Foucault, 'rigid adherence to gender roles becomes the norm and peer cultures take on an active role in enforcing these' (2000:76). Therefore, a study on masculinity in the primary context needs to consider how boys discuss, define and label themselves and each other in order to uncover which performances of masculinity appear to be more desirable and how other performances are rejected. The influence of school upon this cannot be underestimated and, hence, the next section discusses the impact of school in the shaping of masculinities and personal identity.

### **3.4 Masculinities in the school context**

According to Connell (1995), understanding masculinities as they are performed at school involves conceptualizing them as 'collective social practices' which rather than being borne of individual psychologies are socially organized and meaningful actions in historical contexts, both social and political (Lesko, 2000, Kimmel 1996). As such, masculinities at school are highly intertextual and position themselves not only against social trends and political movements but also against current trends

in popular culture which order constructs of gender in terms of prestige and power. Therefore, pupils learn both the official curriculum and the 'hidden curriculum' (Kimmel, 2008) of acceptable forms of being and interaction with others. Analyses of the labelling of peers such as those by Connell (1989), Martino (1999) and Mac an Ghaill (1984) demonstrate the complex nature of how boys create and identify themselves and others and highlight the importance of personal identity, relationships and the role played by school. As Connell asserts, 'it is not too strong to say that masculinity is an aspect of institutions, and is produced in the institutional life: as much as it is an aspect of personality or produced in interpersonal transactions' (1995:608). Studies by Jackson (2006) and Connolly (2010) also show that practices within school shape gender identities and confirm the suggestion by Connell (1989:29) that they can be 'masculinity-making devices'.

Research surrounding how boys perceive and label each other in the school context has brought to light how academic achievement at secondary level is often seen as 'uncool', a phenomenon described by David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, as an 'a laddish culture, that despises academic achievement' (BBC News online). This 'laddish' construction of masculinity commonly adopted by boys is contrary to the values of the education system and has become one of the focuses of the DfES 'Raising Boys Achievement Project', which has resulted in the 'Key Leader Scheme'; a strategy developed to promote 'an ethos which helps eradicate 'it's not cool to learn'

feelings and to diminish the importance of anti-work groups' (McLellan, 2003). In trying to promote initiatives to tackle such attitudes however, Jackson (2010) suggests that there is a frequent assumption that there is a common understanding of 'laddishness' and that educators will know how to tackle this; a belief that has resulted in a lack of guidance or policy to deal with the phenomenon. Further research by Jackson and Dempster (2009) points to how prevalent the 'too cool for school' culture is by highlighting the trend for high achieving boys to disassociate themselves with academic engagement by presenting their success as 'effortless'. This, they point out, is often not tackled in an educational climate where there is an emphasis on result rather than process so that such effortless achievement is valorised rather than viewed as a cause for concern. For boys who are unable to achieve, their 'laddish' behaviour can be expressed through low level disruption expressed in the guise of humour, which according to Barnes (2012), is deployed in versatile and creative ways as a defence mechanism to maintain a blasé image in front of their peers.

Research amongst younger children, (Renold, 2001) has also made visible the tension between being studious, which is often framed as being feminised, with the projection of a heteronormative and hegemonic construction of masculinity. As in earlier investigations of gender and power at primary school (Francis, 1997, 1998), she found that boys who were perceived to be engaged in academic activities did leave themselves open to verbal abuse and ridicule. They often went to great lengths to avoid being viewed by their peers as studious by engaging in

rule breaking or using humour as a coping strategy. Many boys did manage to resist the pressure and achieved highly but did so through solidarity within friendship groups which were often based around a shared interest in role playing and fantasy games. This, Renold argues, may have also been an attempt to avoid the dominant football practices, the exclusion from which could align boys with femininity and thus, homosexuality.

However, in more recent findings by Skelton and Francis (2011b) there is evidence of a possible shift in how some contemporary young boys view education. In their study, amongst 12-13 year old high school children, they conclude that some high achieving and popular boys are able to show an interest in success in literacy and English without it posing a threat to their masculine subjectivities.

### **3.5 Summary**

Theorising masculinities is an essential part of gendered sociological analysis in understanding how boys build a sense of themselves as young men. This chapter has argued the value of an interpretive and post structural approach which views gender as performative and fluid, as outlined by Judith Butler (1990), a position reinforced by discussion of how gender roles appear to be in a state of flux.

However, this chapter has also asserted that materialist and essentialist views have to be considered due to the long held beliefs in the binary opposition of men and women which remain a part of the collective cultural consciousness; a message which is still delivered through modern media and popular culture. It is asserted that this has a considerable impact on the acceptable or desirable models of masculinity which young men feel are available to them.

This opening up of the possibility of multiple masculinities highlights the need for this investigation to consider the notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and so, despite the difficulties which such a concept represents, its use has been justified in that patterns may still be drawn, especially when looking locally and specifically at particular groups. It also argues that a useful framework for considering hegemonic masculinity is that of 'discursive hegemony' (Bartholomaeus, 2013), especially amongst younger boys whose gendered identity is emergent and may not follow expected adult codes of masculinity.

As the specific environment for this study is that of primary school, this chapter also outlined the impact of school in the shaping of masculinities and personal identity and how the boundaries of this are patrolled by both teachers and peers. Having reviewed the debates, the next chapter outlines the research design for the empirical study and the methodological assumptions which underpin it.



## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The research was designed to answer questions about young boys, the construction of their masculinity and how this impacts upon their attitude towards learning literacy. This chapter outlines the epistemological underpinnings which guide the research and argues that a qualitative approach drawing on feminist informed theories is appropriate to address the research questions. A justification is also given for the selection of both the primary school and its cohort. Issues of data collection and the inclusion of the voice of the researcher are addressed and, finally, the ethical issues of working with children and the steps taken to ensure the safety of participants are detailed.

### **4.2 Epistemological Assumptions**

The epistemological assumptions which form the basis for this study draw on feminist informed theories which point to the fluid, complex and contested nature of masculinities. It rejects a monolithic view of masculinity as fixed and immutable.

but nonetheless, as discussed in previous chapters, argues that there are constraints placed on individuals based on their sex ascribed at birth. This relationship between biology, sex and gender is at the heart of how 'masculinity' is generally understood and forms the basis of common ideologies of what it means to be a man. As suggested by McInnes (1998), although being male is essentially anatomical, masculinity is most certainly social, cultural and historical and it exists as a sociocultural construction. Therefore, whilst the individual's sense of expression of masculinity may differ and even change over time, there is some commonality of male experience in that they construct themselves within the boundaries and underlying assumptions made by the society of which they are a part. This study is therefore located in understandings of masculinities which are at the intersection between expectations caused by fixed notions of a deep structure of masculinity (Tolson 1977) and more interpretive, contested ideas of how boys construct their gendered selves.

#### ***4.2.1 Feminist informed theories of masculinity***

Being a biological male 'does not confer masculinity' (MacInnes 1998:77) and as, argued by Sedgwick (1985) and Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1998), masculinity is not always exclusive to men, a position argued more recently by Francis, (2010). In fact, a complex range of social factors impact upon the shaping and enacting of

masculinities which include 'age, physique, sexual orientation, class, religion, ethnicity, status and education' (Beynon 2002:10), all of which influence the sense, experience and enactment of what it is to be a man or woman. This idea of masculinity as a 'dramaturgical accomplishment' (Coleman 1990) often serves to highlight the choices which can be made in terms of being a modern man but it must also be remembered that those who choose to stray too far from the path of what is culturally acceptable can often be marginalised and this can act as a regulating mechanism in how young boys develop their sense of self.

Not all reactions to the shifting sands of what it is to be a modern man have been negative. For some, the flexibility offered by the changing roles of men and women has been welcomed and feminist informed writers have clearly positioned themselves in opposition to the anti-feminist backlash (Kimmel and Kaufmann, 1994). This has meant that masculinities have begun to be explored from a poststructuralist perspective (Pease, 2000, Whitehead, 2002) and as the constraints of what forms the basis for accepted constructions of masculinity have been highlighted, these have also been called into question. Thus feminist informed theories have explicitly discussed men, their roles in society and engendered wider discussion of their gendered identities.

This study finds itself located at the intersection of two feminist traditions, both structural and post-structural. It takes a feminist approach in that it accepts the principle that boys are socialised to be men within the context of a patriarchal

society and whilst many may not choose or desire a hegemonic status amongst their peers, may still, due to the impact of their sexed bodies, have expectations of their place within society. It acknowledges that despite the marked change in the roles of men caused by the shifting landscape of the economy and family patterns, the discourses of certain movements points to an attachment to structures recognisable in more materialist concepts of masculinity. This study offers a feminist analysis of masculinity which acknowledges that whilst late modernity is characterised by individualism and reflexivity (Giddens,1991, Baumann 2000), it cannot be viewed as having been unhinged from traditional ideas of masculinity which are often still instilled in young boys.

### **4.3 Aim and research questions**

My research centres on the question: does the way in which boys actively construct, manage and negotiate their masculine identity in the primary school environment impact on their perception of literacy?

In order to address this I ask specifically,

- How do boys talk about their perception of academic success or failure?
- How do boys construct, manage and negotiate their masculine identities within the primary school context?
- What gender performances and subjectivities intersect with the acceptance or rejection of the study of literacy?

The purpose of the aim and the research questions which emerged from both the conceptual position taken and the extent literature is discussed in the introductory chapter. The research questions are based on the assumption that masculine identities are developed dynamically through social interaction which is informed by much broader social structures (Connell, 1995, 2005, Renold, 2005). As

argued by Rowan et al. 'every individual boy accesses, performs and transforms multiple versions of masculinity in various contexts or at various times' (2002:67). Therefore, the notion of gender, which is often viewed as something 'natural', is in fact, constructed through language to develop binary and hierarchical categories. The boys' concepts of gender roles is an essential part of the research for how they internalize and enforce a regime of normalising practices is fundamental to how they establish desirable performances of masculinity.

The research questions focus entirely on how the boys present themselves in the context of the school environment and how they patrol the borders of what is acceptable in the performance of gender. However, as boys may negotiate a variety of contexts including both school and the family it may be that each of these offers different ways for them to construct their masculinity as they build a sense of themselves and their relationships. It is therefore also necessary, during the course of the research process, to consider how the participants view themselves within the context of their family in terms of literate practices.

Whilst some theoretical assumptions have been made in respect of how gender is socially constructed, the research questions reveal the exploratory nature of the inquiry. Therefore the use of language such as 'how' and 'perception' signals the openness of the inquiry to what will emerge during the discussion with the participants. In seeking to gather the perception of the participants, the relative nature of this is accepted and may be different for different boys. As the purpose

of the study is to examine how social experience is created and given meaning it is therefore located in qualitative research traditions in which the social construction of reality is explored. However, in keeping with the conceptual framework, which acknowledges the impact of materialist positions on the view of what it is to be a boy or a girl in our society, the research questions reflect that there is a value on drawing on the diversity of both materialist and post-structuralist positions in order to analyse how young masculinities are constructed.

#### **4.4 Methodology**

As the purpose of this study is to provide a nuanced picture of the attitudes of young boys to literacy, a qualitative approach is taken in order to build rich descriptions of complex circumstances for, as asserted by Marshall and Rossman, 'human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them are understood' (2011:91). It has also been suggested by Schultz (2006) that qualitative research such as this is often more accessible to educators and thus, is more likely to result in changes in practice.

The thrust of the study required empirical investigation in a particular context (that of primary school) and so the interviews were carried out there. The overall purpose was to draw conclusions as to the complexity of issues surrounding boys

and literacy and although the interviews were carried out in one specific primary school, this is used to illustrate a more general principle (Nisbet and Watt, 1984:72). This idea of using wider generalisation has been criticised (Gomm et al, 2000), especially where the approach is too naturalistic rather than scientific or where the study itself is too narrow to be representative and so, in order to address these issues, all of the boys over three year groups in the primary school were involved in discussion. This facilitated the gathering of a range of perspectives and whilst the data was based on personal and vicarious experience, my final conclusions with regards to wider pedagogy are tentative but rationalistic and propositional. Furthermore, the experience of Primary School education is so scrutinised and monitored at a Government level that the activities and culture within any one school could be deemed to be reasonably representative of the experience of a defined population (that of young boys).

The collection of data was a key area of decision making in order that the research questions were effectively addressed. Both the literature used to contextualize the study and the research questions point towards a constructivist, discourse-based perspective. This is one which accepts that how boys represent their masculinity to themselves and others is a unique and subjective experience. The study therefore required a method which captured the discursive construction of identity which is performative and fluid in nature and often contradictory. According to Bruner (1986), humans often use 'storied text' to make meaning of their experience and 'subjective landscapes' (ibid:29) and these stories are built from the lived realities



of the participants. Shacklock also describes how 'by locating stories of experience with descriptions of the context in which they occur, we build a sense of how lives are not free floating but socially constructed.' (2005:156). Based on this conceptual position, the methodology selected was a qualitative, interpretive approach; an approach which is naturalistic and situated in the everyday world of human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Silverman, 2005).

Qualitative inquiry favours the myriad of possibilities raised by individual experience and seeks to interpret a broad spectrum. Thus, it is appropriate to answer research questions which ask 'what' and 'how' as opposed to the more reductionist 'why' posed in positivist and postpositivist methods which seek to uncover a singular truth. A further advantage to a qualitative inquiry is the broad range of possibility offered due to the multiplicity of approach and its emphasis on being able to offer detailed description in a variety of forms. This 'sets the scene' for consistent focus on drawing out diversity and also allows for the voice of the researcher to be heard, an important detail which is also considered in this chapter. Finally, qualitative data is also often focussed on social change (Lather, 2004) and as such this means that the voices of 'the other' need to be heard. This is particularly challenging when working with young children who, as a group, may find it difficult to have a voice when being heard and interpreted through the lens of an adult. Within the larger grouping of 'children' there is also the 'other' and the commitment to an ethos of focussing on political and moral aspects during qualitative data collection is a way of ensuring that the study truly reflects the

range of experiences of young boys including those with views held by the minority. The approach also cements the idea of a commitment to the overall purpose of the study which is to offer conclusions as to how pedagogy might change as a result of the findings.

As the experience of the participants is the essence of what needed to be captured I felt that semi-structured interviews (Drever, 2003) would be effective in achieving this; an encounter which contains some guidance as to the themes which need to be discussed yet allows some freedom for the participants to explore aspects of their experience which they feel are relevant. I felt that, given the age of the children, and the reticence that appeared during the pilot study, that the participants would benefit from the structure of having specific questions to answer with the freedom to deviate once their confidence had grown.

The analysis of the interviews drew upon Foucauldian notions of discourse in which knowledge and power are shaped by and through language (Cohen, 2011). This central element of power as a defining feature of discourse is revealed in the boys' labelling of their peers and how they feel they are defined by others both on an individual, group and organisational level. Issues of how power is negotiated, possessed and denied in the school context were particularly important in addressing the research question which explores how the 'popular boy' is constructed.

As asserted by Fairclough (1992), discourses not only reflect but construct and perpetuate social practice and so, in analysing the narratives of the boys, it was important to consider not only how they represented their experience but how this was influenced by wider 'prevailing discourses' (Francis, 1999). This was essential in exploring the options available to boys in 'packaging' their masculinity and how they positioned themselves relative to girls and each other. As Burr points out, the language available to us 'set[s] limits upon, or at least strongly channel[s] not only what we can think and say, but also what we can do or what can be done to us' (2003:63). This notion is pertinent in considering how, even though different types of masculinity may be identified, boys may be limited in terms of constructing their own identity. This takes into account how 'although we always perceive the world from a particular viewpoint, the world acts back on us to constrain the points of view that are possible' (Seale, 1999:470). The exploration of how boys position themselves subject to wider gendered discourse was intended to reveal some insights as to how some constructions of masculinity manage not to reject literate practices which require expressive and emotional responses.

#### **4.5 The Pilot Study**

Due to the challenges of working with children, I undertook a pilot study in 2012 which informed the design of the empirical study which is reported in this thesis. The pilot was carried out amongst slightly older children in secondary school and comprised of a focus group with fifteen boys across years 7 to 8 and subsequent interviews with four of them.

The results of the pilot confirmed previous studies (Martino, 1999, McKellan, 2004, Jackson, 2004) that, at secondary level, being good or taking an interest in certain subjects or being seen to work hard academically influenced how a boy might be labelled at school. Whilst the labels were more modern than previous studies such as 'chavs and geeks', the link to what was considered to be desirable masculine traits remained unchanged. There were clear links to how reading impacted upon how boys were perceived at school by their peers; voluntarily reading as a leisure activity whilst at school in break times was considered to be 'weird' and those who enjoyed reading were labelled as 'nerds' or 'spofs' which was deemed to be negative. In particular, throughout the interviews, there was a clear link made by the boys between the act of reading and its association with being interested in academic success. The perceptions of the boys at secondary school appeared to be so embedded that this informed the eventual direction of this study and

refocused its aim on primary education to explore how and when such tensions between masculinity and the study of literacy begin.

The pilot study also raised concerns of approach in terms of ethical issues which are outlined below as well as ensuring that a range of voices were heard. Issues of 'gatekeeping' by staff during the pilot study subsequently informed my decision to carry out a study in which *all* of the boys could be spoken to in a school rather than a sample of boys from different schools over whose selection I might have no control.

#### **4.6 Ethical issues**

There are ethical considerations in all research involving children in seeking the necessary consent and this is sometimes viewed as being only required by either the school or the parent. However, David et al (2000) challenges this idea and suggests that consent should be considered from the point of view of the children and the information they are given in order to make an informed decision to participate. Therefore for this study, the children were given a consent form (appendix II).

The issue of whether children in school based research are able to make a decision about participating, when pressure from teachers dictates that compliance is seen as politeness towards a visiting researcher, was highlighted during the pilot study. The children in the pilot study were clearly not given enough time to consider participation and on the morning of the discussion the host teacher had decided it would be best to 'go up to the form room and surprise them'. The motivation for the participants therefore was not based upon considered reflection but dictated by the teacher and whilst to 'opt out' was possible it may have been difficult in terms of having the necessary assertiveness to do so.

In order to overcome this for subsequent research, I ensured that I went to the school in advance, to meet the children and discuss the study with them. I also discussed participation with the children at the outset of each focus group and interview session so they were being asked to opt in, rather than being made to opt out, of the study.

During early consideration of location, I decided that the school was the most appropriate place for holding interviews. Whilst there may have been advantages gained from interviewing at home, or at a more neutral location such as a local community hall, the open plan primary school offered both the opportunity to speak to children in a setting that was private but where I could be seen by other staff. Due to ethical considerations I felt that, despite being DBS checked, that it

was necessary to have staff available and to have access to a safeguarding person in case of any disclosures. By containing the study to the school it also offered a greater control in defining roles which were agreed with the staff and which may not have been possible when dealing with a number of parents/carers who may have wanted to be present during interviews off site. The issue of equal access to participation was also resolved by interviewing at the school as, practically, it made it easier to include all children in the focus groups.

Ethical approval was obtained from The Keele University Ethical Review Panel in December 2013 (appendix VII). Written consent was sought from all participants and their parents who were given an information sheet (appendix VI) and further information was given to staff at the school (appendix, III, IV). The digital recordings were kept on a password protected computer and all real names were removed to ensure anonymity.

#### **4.7 The primary school and its pupils**

‘Roundstone’ School is a mixed gender primary school of 230 pupils aged 4 to 11 years old. The average class size is 27 with a near even number of boy to girl ratio and no ethnic diversity throughout years 4 to 6 or children who speak English as a second language . Only 6% of pupils receive free school meals and the

catchment of the school could be considered to be an affluent area as house prices are above the national average. The last Ofsted visit graded the school as outstanding and places are sought after in comparison with other local primary schools; pupils results at key stage 2 SATs are 43% at level 5 for English and 52% for maths as compared to the national averages of 33% and 34% (DfES, 2010). The school has 11 members of staff and of the teachers required for reception to year 6, three of the teachers are male. There is an active parent community who meet regularly and raise money for additional resources.

The school has a particular ethos in that it values outdoor activity highly and has developed a woodland, pond and allotment area so that pupils spend time outdoors. There has been some controversy over the last few years as children are allowed to climb trees in the woodland and make dens resulting in some minor injuries. The outdoor areas have been used to support the curriculum, for example, pupils have learned about the production of food by growing their own and setting up a farmer's market. The school has links with Sportscape and so is also active in promoting sport. The curriculum is delivered through project based learning and this is often led by books, for example when 'The Hobbit' was the theme, pupils read the book, did writing activities based around this and learned maths through calculating the size of the Hobbit house.

During discussions with staff, it was clear that the teachers felt that it was important to have male teachers in the school. Whilst talking to female members



of staff it transpired that the first male teacher had been treated quite differently on the grounds that he was male. He was often allowed to 'forget' playground duty and other members of female staff would go for him as it seemed generally regarded that he would become absorbed in his tasks in the classroom and didn't go. The willingness to allow him to do this appeared to be linked to what was seen as a natural inability to multi-task as a man and there were also comments which implied that the female staff felt sorry for him, being young and having to work in an all-female environment. It was commented on that his performance had changed since other men were subsequently employed as this had forced him to 'up his game' in order to compete.

The community of teachers appeared to be close-knit and this involved activities outside of school with celebrations and outings at the end of each half term. All of the staff were committed to the school and a system had been devised to meet a particular process of change where a 'plan' had been simply put up in the staffroom and staff were able to add their name to which part of the project they would like to take responsibility for. In this way, members of the team seem empowered and the working atmosphere was very positive.

During discussion, staff did make remarks and comments about boys and girls as homogenous groups, seeing them as having different characteristics, interests, needs and wants. Whilst all pupils were treated as individuals, at a conceptual level boys were viewed as being less able to sit still and in need of more outdoor

time and girls as more compliant and inclined to be 'bitchy'. This was despite conversations throughout my time there which indicated that when staff talked about pupils as individuals, they clearly knew them very well and many did not fall into the stereotypes which were touched upon.

The data collection was carried out in the primary school as agreed by the Head Teacher with whom I made links in my professional role (appendix V). Having learned from research undertaken at a different school, as part of a pilot study, that roles need to be clearly defined, I met with her on a number of occasions to discuss the purpose of the study, how I intended to ensure the wellbeing of the children and my intentions and requirements with regards to data collection. She approved the participation on the basis that children actively 'opt in'. We also discussed the length of the interviews based on the children's ability to focus and decided on a maximum interview time of 30 minutes per child at any one time. Issues in possible conflicts of interest were pre-empted as far as possible by agreeing with the Head Teacher that a summary of the final conclusions would be shared with her after the submission of the thesis but the identity of the children in terms of any quotes would not be revealed.

#### **4.8 Why these boys?**

As discussed in the literature chapters, there are many influences other than gender which might impact upon personal identity and attitudes to school. The primary school was therefore chosen due to the rather limited range in socio-economic backgrounds of the participants with a view to limiting some of the other variables. Whilst it cannot be claimed that all of the boys were from identical socio-economic backgrounds, there were similarities in terms of cultural capital and most had supportive parents who encouraged reading and valued success at school. Therefore, the boys in the study, according to the literature, benefited from all of the felicity conditions which are advantageous for success at school and an engagement with literacy. All of the boys spoken to also had access both at home, and at school to PCs, internet and/or Xbox and Playstations. This was useful as the literature review also points to the need to consider whether boys value other mediums where literacy skills are required and so it was possible to explore how attitudes to these compared to more traditional print based activities.

## **4.9 The data collection process**

Prior to the data collection, I was present at the school on a number of occasions so that I could become familiar with the structure of the school day, speak to teachers and gather information about the school in order to understand its ethos and its role in the community. I also spent time on playground duty with teachers to consider the different spaces available to the children and how these were supervised. After the process of getting to know the school and its practices, the data collection was then carried out in two phases; the first comprised of small discussion groups from which participants were then sampled to take part in the second phase of semi-structured interviews. Visits to the school began in the early part of 2015 and focus groups and interviews took place from May to July 2015.

### ***4.9.1 Discussion groups***

At the outset of the project I wanted to gather a wide breadth of opinion from the boys and so data was gathered by working with whole year groups. I spoke to all of the boys in years 4, 5 and 6 in small discussion groups of approximately 5-6 boys in each; thirty three boys were spoken to in total. It was expected that the

opportunity to meet with all of boys would not only serve to forge a bond and build familiarity but would then allow for purposive sampling for individual interviews so that differing viewpoints could be explored in further depth.

Renold (2001) outlines in her research amongst primary school children how group interviews, when organised by friendship groups, were particularly effective and this is the method I also used. The selection process for the small group discussions was informal and the boys decided amongst themselves who they wished to attend with from their year. Not only did this create a non-threatening and comfortable atmosphere but it also offered the boys some degree of control at the outset in being able to choose their group. Renold also discussed how such an approach helped 'destabilise the adult-centricism embedded in many research projects' (2001:372). Interviews were all carried out on the school premises as the open plan nature of the school allowed for me to interview boys without having a teacher actually present in the group.

Whilst I had gained some experience during the pilot study and this had afforded me the opportunity to consider how my approach could be improved with regards to ethical and participatory issues, the hurdle of ensuring that young participants spoke and stayed on topic, remained. In order to address this, an activity was developed which could be completed as a lead into discussion with the groups (appendix VIII). This enabled the children to focus and feel confident and also provided an ice-breaker so that they could relax and participate by initially taking

turns to answer the questions. This introductory task was centred around discussing an avatar similar to those found on popular gaming consoles and its purpose was to avoid discussing real individuals or participants in the group. This appeared to be fun as the children warmed to the activity and soon became vocal so that the discussion moved on to explore attitudes to academic achievement, literacy and desirable constructions of masculinity. Every effort was made during this phase of group discussion to ensure that all participants had a turn to speak and air their views.

All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts of the discussion groups were analysed subsequent to each one to identify common themes as well as to identify differing perceptions and opinions. The breadth of opinion was then used in the sampling process so that differing perspectives could be explored further.

#### **4.9.2 Sampling**

Patton describes purposive sampling as unashamedly selective and an opportunity to gather 'information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research' (1990:69). This method allowed me to target participants who were able to provide insights in

order to address the research questions (Patton 2002, Cresswell & Clark 2007). Whilst it cannot be claimed that all variables of all constructions of young masculinities were represented, the initial discussion groups, during which I spoke to all of the boys, allowed me to access a breadth of views so that boys with different perspectives could be strategically sampled to explore their ideas in greater depth. Following the discussion groups I went on to interview sixteen boys individually who were selected for this reason.

#### **4.9.3 Interviews**

Given the subject of this study, I considered interviews to be the most effective way of exploring the research questions, both of which were carried out following the guidance offered by Patton (2002) and Fontana and Frey (2005). All of the interviews were conducted at the school without a teacher sitting with us so that the children would feel free to voice their opinion. Whilst the school did prove to be a lively and noisy environment, it appeared that the children felt empowered by being on their 'home turf' and enjoyed showing me around the school and explaining its routines. The purpose of interviews in qualitative research is to 'allow the researcher to enter the other person's perspective' (Patton, 2002:341) and with such a generational gap between myself and the participants, I felt that it

was important to spend time at the school to better understand their experience and how their days were structured.

Patton (2002) points out that the success of any research project rests upon the expertise of the interviewer and the ability to obtain quality data. Hence, for the semi structured individual interviews there was scrupulous planning of an interview schedule (appendix I). This comprised of a general schedule which was broadly based on having the participant discuss their attitude to academic success, literacy and other ways of being successful at school socially. However, as the purpose of the individual interviews was to explore the breadth of opinion identified during the group discussions, each schedule also included notes and comments made by the particular participant during the discussion group stage so that these could be interrogated further. Every effort was made to allow the boys the opportunity to offer their views and naturally there was some inevitable digression, particularly where some boys wanted to vent their feelings on aspects of school with which they weren't entirely happy. Whilst there was some gentle encouragement to guide some participants back to the topic at hand, they were encouraged to speak freely to allow for open and broad responses.

I approached all of the interviews from the perspective that total objectivity is impossible as, being a teacher, and from a different generation from the participants, our views are both historically and contextually bound and as a result cannot be neutral (Fontana and Frey, 2005). My intention, therefore, was to



recognise from the outset that my definition of labels may be significantly different from the children interviewed and so I probed, wherever possible, what was meant by particular words and phrases, especially those which appeared commonly or were new to me.

#### **4.10 Data analysis**

For the analysis of the interviews with the boys on an individual level, I considered how words carry meanings and how these are context sensitive. Perhaps one of the biggest hurdles to be overcome in analysing the results of the interviews was that of interpreting a social reality which may not be shared due to age. As pointed out by Scott et al (2011:29) 'it is impossible to separate oneself as a researcher from the historical and cultural context that defines one's interpretive frame since both the subject and the object of research are located in pre-understood worlds.' Every attempt was made to understand how the boys interpreted their labels and these needed to be questioned and probed, a process requiring both creativity and conceptual flexibility. However, interpretation can never be arbitrary and it was intended that due consideration would be given to my own voice within the study which is based in interpretivist and constructivist philosophies (Schwant, 2000). This ensured that I was striving towards understanding the experience of participants in order to interpret them whilst at the

same time accepting that the participants' projection of the self is based in their social experience and as such is a 'moment to moment situated experience' (Augustinuous and Walker,1995:276).

From the outset the voices of the boys was not viewed as simply raw data but as reconstructed narratives requiring critical examination. As noted by Glesne (2011) this was not a separate stage of the project but an ongoing process and a reflective activity that informed further data collection and writing (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). My own voice was then consciously inserted to avoid this self being concealed (Scott et al,1999). As this study focuses on the lived experience it is accepted that interaction and language is not only a means for understanding but also plays a role in constructing social reality as perspectives change due to daily interaction with significant others. Thus, when interviewing the boys, it was necessary to consider how, during the course of the interviews, their ideas were emergent and may have been brought about by the study itself.

According to Scott et al (1999:11), 'any research, whether in the natural or social sciences, makes knowledge claims and for that reason alone is implicated in epistemological questions'. Not least of these is the consideration of my own role as the researcher and the subjectivity I may bring to any inquiry as, according to Scott, it is the researcher who 'define[s] the problem...the quality of the interaction between researcher and researched, the theoretical framework [and] who writes the final text' (ibid, 1999:17). Therefore, according to Fine (1994) all researchers

are epistemic agents who both embody and embed their stances. This is a particularly pertinent consideration in the gathering of qualitative data involving children where there are most certainly issues of power. Therefore, during the both period of data collection and the subsequent analysis there needed to be a consistent and ongoing consideration of the extent to which the scripts of the boys were being embedded with the voice of a dominant adult. Certainly the constructivist philosophical position taken for the study presented certain problems when considering issues of the validity in drawing conclusions as its belief in multiple constructed realities 'is not consistent with the idea that criteria for judging the trustworthiness of an account are possible' (Seale, 1999:468). In order to overcome this problem Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose using the criteria of 'authenticity' and it is hoped, that this is demonstrated in the thesis by presenting a range of different realities and by considering and commenting on my own overall position as a researcher.

In addition to considering the 'Fidelity' (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995) which requires honesty in terms of reporting, rigour must also be achieved in terms of evidence; be it through thorough transcriptions or conscientious coding which is checked with participants. This was paramount in the issue of defining and explaining 'labels' as it is accepted that as abstract constructs they can only be viewed through the eyes of the actors themselves.

At the outset of the data collection process, each of the transcripts for the discussion groups were closely analysed, following the approach suggested by Rapley (2011), which is often referred to as 'in vivo coding'. Key words and phrases were highlighted, and subsequently colour coded to identify both common themes and contradictions amongst the boys. Notes were taken during the analysis to raise points again during individual interviews and to check any comments for subjective meaning and to explore constructs which were unfamiliar to me. These notes were also used to explore comments in the individual interviews which had been made during our initial contact so that my ongoing analysis shaped the study as it developed.

Following the transcription of the individual interviews, these were again, analysed so that key words, phrases and sentences were labelled and colour coded by theme. These were examined to identify any correlation with the themes identified in the literature review (performing masculinities, maintaining gender orders, the rejection of school and literacy) whilst also keeping an open mind to evidence which might call them into question or to the emergence of new themes. As asserted by Bowen (2006:17) it was necessary to use a 'constant comparative method, marked by an iterative process...to identify points of similarity as well as difference'. The revision of coding and identification of themes within their discourse was continued to the point of saturation (Patton, 2002) and this became central to my understanding of their experience and informed my subsequent conclusions.

I was aware of the software packages available to assist with the coding of themes but rejected this as a method in order to retain the integrity of the context of particular comments and chose instead to consistently review the transcripts in the light of emergent themes as the data collection moved forward. In this way, I feel I was not only able to watch for themes prevalent in the various discourses concerning boys and their schooling but also to ensure that the data was revisited to process and link emerging themes which challenged existing studies.

#### **4.11 Summary**

This chapter offered a detailed discussion of the methodology adopted for this study. It argued that using a qualitative interpretive approach was the most suitable way to answer the research questions and outlines the approach taken to recognise my own voice as adult in interpreting the views of young children. Particular care has been taken to explain the procedural elements of the study with regards to the ethical considerations of working with young boys as well as justifying the selection of participants in terms of minimising other variables which can affect attitudes towards school. The chapter also argues the reasons for recognising both a materialist and social constructivist approach to theorising masculinities to recognise the influences at play in how boys view themselves and

others. Finally, this chapter set out the basis for discussion of the analyses and findings in the next three chapters.

## **Chapter 5: How do boys talk about their perception of academic success?**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter considers how boys talk about their perception of academic success. This addresses the first research question which is important for this study as it is necessary to consider whether an engagement with literacy is merely part of the wider context of engagement with the academic culture at school as a whole, the rejection of which is so often seen at secondary level (Jackson, 2002, Martino, 2010). In the literature surrounding boys and their education, it is suggested that there is a connection between the social construction of masculinity and the refusal to play the 'ability game' (Jackson, 2002:43) rooted in the wish to express a disdain for authority and in doing so, reject values which are socially constructed as 'feminine'. It is also argued that strategies of being unwilling to comply at school not only serve to deflect attention from poor academic performance but enact hegemonic patterns of masculinity which are then emulated even by boys who are capable of achieving (Martino, 2000). These constructions of gender, are deeply rooted in what is considered to be typical behaviour for boys resulting in a 'boy code' (Pollack, 1998) which comprises of stereotypical masculine behaviour, the borders of which are patrolled so that non-compliance can lead to bullying or rejection by peers.

This chapter addresses how younger boys talk about academic success in relation to how they define it and what it means to them. The idea of how it is differentiated for them as part of their gendered identity is also explored and it is suggested that contrary to the findings amongst boys at secondary school outlined above, younger boys do engage with the culture fostered at school so that to engage with learning and achieve academically is intrinsically valued.

## **5.2 Academic Success**

The view of academic success can be associated with a number of factors ranging from the acceptance of structures which are in place to measure it, to the internalising and placing of value on such targets and results. In relating their thoughts on academic success and what it is for them, all of the boys interviewed appeared to challenge the existing literature (Skelton 1999, Renolds, 2001) and placed a great deal of significance not only on the grades given by the school but in being able to track their own progress against them; of having a starting point in order to be able to gain a sense of 'moving forward' incrementally. In this sense, there was an almost dual approach to the merits of being graded; one was the measurement against others and the other, the ability to measure personal progress as an individual. Certainly, the structures offered by school in terms of



target setting and grading had been internalised by all of the boys and were seen as important. There was no evidence that any of the boys questioned the system and there was an element of gravitas in discussion of the SATs which appeared to be viewed as a focal point which provided them with the sense of a clearly defined goal which was being worked towards. Even boys who were not in the final year discussed this as an end goal and their success in terms of the SATs was linked to quite mature concerns about the future. This culture was possibly a reflection of the concerns of teachers and their need to demonstrate progression as part of the criteria by which the school, as a whole, would be measured by Ofsted and in national league tables. The links made by the boys to future employment also mirrored the wider concerns of adults of the future roles to be played by them in an ever increasingly competitive jobs market and globalised consumer culture. This was rooted in the idea, at school, that all of the children had to succeed in literacy as to do so was essential to gain employment and again, possibly reflected the shift outlined in the literature review of modern patterns of employment which no longer include the option of manual labour. At this stage in their schooling, whilst there was some evidence of a 'boy code' (Pollack, 1998) which demanded stereotypically masculine behaviour, the rejection of school values was not part of this. To the contrary, the 'code' in evidence included the need to excel at school as a part of a hegemonic construction of masculinity which was admired by others.

In many cases the school culture seemed to be spoken of as being reinforced by the home life of the boys where marks, grades and progress were also valued by

parents and carers so that the proof of achievement was linked to the further rewards it could bring in terms of either praise or being made to feel proud by parents or even in the material rewards which were set at home for good school reports or results in SATs. The rewards of academic success also included how they were viewed by their peers and offered a competitive backdrop to the school context which had been internalised so that there was an intrinsic acceptance that being measured against others was significant. As this was often linked to the wider context of life and future employment, the boys framed this as also being competitive, with success often being defined against material gain and status. This appeared to support the findings of Alloway and Gilbert (1997) of an expectation of professional success, post school, made by boys who are more socioeconomically privileged who come to view literacy as an important means to a desired end.

Other comments by the participants of what it was to be academically successful were linked to *how* this could be achieved and explored the process itself. This was seen as not only an individual pursuit but required a number of felicity conditions such as a 'good' teacher, the behaviour of the class and enjoyment of the subject.

### **5.2.1 *Being measured and tested***

All of the participants interviewed appeared to know and accept that they were measured academically against others. However, there appeared to be some contradictions concerning how explicit this was as whilst the majority of boys were well aware of where they stood in terms of peers and what was desirable in terms of SATs grades, groups were named to minimise this distinction. Often language was framed around the educational notions of 'struggle' and 'challenge' which indicated the dynamic process of striving to achieve the next goal. This showed the extent to which the shared educational culture was created through a discourse of personal responsibility and motivation to progress and achieve and this was evident even in the discussion group from pupils in Year 4. The internalisation of the need to do well against a lack of ability is seen in Ben's pauses as he reaches for a term to try to describe someone who is a low achiever before giving up and reframing his comment. This could perhaps challenge findings which point to the tension between being an academic achiever and the projection of a hegemonic construction of masculinity (Renolds, 2001, Francis 1998) as here, the inability to succeed in study is presented as being somewhat 'shameful' by the efforts made by Nick to find an acceptable vocabulary with which to describe it:

Alfie: I do higher maths. I'm in the higher group with Ethan and Toby

J: Do you all know what group you're in?

All: Yes

J: Have you guessed what group you're in, or are you told?

All: We're told, yes

Nick : We share on tables. So if you have....so if you were, like... in the...so you're.... really good at maths but you're in the lowest group, then math will be too easy for you, so.

J: If you don't work hard, do you move down groups?

Jay: You can. I got moved.

Alfie: Because Joey's being moved down a group because he was, at first, in the highest group

Cole: ...Struggling in one up

Alfie: But since he was struggling he's moved down by one

Toby: And then I came up

Alfie: He's gone up so much, you know

Jay: Yes, that's if you struggle

J:           Ok, what are the groups called

Jay:        Isosceles, isn't it?

Toby:       No, equilateral

Alfie:       And then it's isosceles. Then it's right angles

Finbar:     Right angles. No right angles is at the top isn't it?

Alfie:       No, I'm right angles and I'm not in the top group

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

In the school context the boys in Year 4 pointed to an experience of enjoyment at being able to compete against peers and the response in the focus group was largely positive to being tested. However, the 'tests' prior to SATs included both formal and informal assessment with the latter often taking the form of games. This seemed to be enjoyed both from a participatory and also spectator experience. Certainly, as expressed by Alfie and Cole, there is some aspect of pride in excelling, a finding which contradicts earlier studies (Francis, 1997,1998) which found that boys who were perceived to be engaged in academic activities left themselves open to verbal abuse and ridicule. However, it must be noted that whilst my data contradicts some existing studies in terms of boys' engagement with school, their perception of the value of competition perhaps still confirms some of the expectations of a traditional construction of hegemonic masculinity:

Nick: We have loads of tests.

J: Okay. Do you like having tests?

All: Yes.

Alfie: Yes, definitely, especially maths.

J: Alright, ok. Why is that? Because you like to compete?

Alfie: Technically, me and Louis are the only ones competing at the minute for the top person.

J: Because you want to come first?

Alfie: Technically, yes

Louis: It's all about if you're good at maths, like us, basically.

Cole: We play this times table game, and like a second after she says the question and Alfie answers it.

Alfie: Or addition game. Yes, it's anything, like questions sometimes then I'm like 64!, 87! Yes, and I actually got the right answer from the table..chair..table legs.

Louis: Table legs. While the other person was standing.. standing there working it out.

Cole: He was standing there working it out in his head.

Alfie: And I was like 4!, 8!

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

The evidence from Alfie suggests that there is some element of acceptance of hierarchy as he does not recognise any competition except from one other boy and this is not contested by any of his peers who settle instead for 'enjoying the show'. All of the boys in the exchange therefore co-operate in creating the conditions whereby the participants are celebrated for their academic abilities. This points to the role of academic success in the construction of a discourse of hegemonic masculinity (Bartholomaeus, 2013); to be dominant is to compete and succeed. This means that whilst hegemony in the school context was often constructed via displays of physicality, 'beating' others in other ways was also admired. This also demonstrated how ways of 'doing boy' overlap and often work together to uphold the gender order (Connell, 2008) so that boys who are not able to compete are complicit in maintaining the hierarchy by praising and admiring those who do.

Alfie's further comments show the competitive nature of academic prowess in the primary school environment and the extent to which he uses it to measure himself in terms of both ability and status. Far from academic success framing him as subordinate in his masculinity (Connell, 1995), he actively uses it to discursively construct himself as dominant and competitive:

Alfie:       It's only in maths like me and Toby are having a competition. Like, we're saying we're having a competition. It's just that, technically,

Toby is saying, I'm this one, and I'm like, one level downwards and he's probably just, like promoting himself so he's in front.

*(Year 4, interview)*

Many of the boys from Year 4 to 6 expressed a shared culture of being ranked by, and ranking themselves, both academically and at other activities, in terms of a hierarchy amongst their peers. This was presented in a positive light by those such as Alfie who compared favourably, but with less certainty by those working at what were perceived to be lower levels. However, there was much evidence of complicity (Connolly, 1995) by boys who were unable to compete, in both their willingness to reward those who did with admiration and their striving to achieve. Unlike the findings of Jackson (2004), none of the boys showed any indication of refusing to play the ability game but, on the contrary, were happy to receive extra help.

All of the boys interviewed were concerned with levels as an indication of doing well and, as in the case of Isiah, wanted support so that they could progress. None of the participants expressed any rejection of the system and wanted to progress to the next level and showed some degree of pride where this had been achieved.



J: So why do you feel you're not as good at English?

Isiah: Because I sort of, like, compare myself to other people. I'm not as good as them but I'm pretty good now as I go out with Mrs Wilde.

J: Ok. Do you get extra help?

Isiah: Yes. She gives you a bit. I don't do that anymore. I got moved up a level

J: When you did your SATs then, did you feel it was important to do well?

Isiah: Yes, I was like, Literacy, hmmm. And then I was thinking, oh yes, Mrs Wilde, she's taught me most of it.

J: Did you do well in your 'SATs'?

Isiah: Actually, I did more than I hoped

a

*(Year 6, interview)*

S

i

Similarly, in Year 5, the focus group showed a willingness to be tested and had internalised its value. Even a year in advance of the SATs, the focus on them as an end goal to the Primary School experience is expressed. It is noteworthy, that despite the open nature of the interview and the digression to other topics, the boys make few comments on what they have learned in terms of its value beyond its translation into a final grade, possibly a reflection of how status is earned through end result rather than through process. This is demonstrated in the Year

5 discussion group in the conclusion that there is not enough grading, and the desire shown to have this reinforced in ways seen in the media they watch. This perhaps illustrates the important part played by academic success in creating a hierarchy and status within the school context – an idea which also challenges previous studies:

J: If you want to get good SATs grades, is this an important year too to get good SATs grades?

Isaac: Yes

Ollie: Yes, very.

J: Would you prefer it if there were no SATs?

Ollie: No, I wouldn't like that because SATs gets you a good job

Dan: I like to know where I'm working after [overtalking]

Adam: Yes, what level. How high you can work at

Dan: Because, like, you have level fours, threes, fives

Adam: I think it was like an A...I wish it was like the American ones like A, A\* and you get, like, grades say, and [overtalking]

Dan: like every piece or writing I'd like to know what kind of level that is.

Adam: Yes, like A, A\* or B. What are the really good grades, obviously

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

By Year 5, there is also a noticeable difference in the view of testing as being more serious and less connected to games as seen in the 'nostalgic' comment by Dan:

Dan: I really enjoyed it in Year 4 because we did, like, these competitions. Like last year we did this competition. We were going to make a movie But first we decide what the movie is going to be about. We have to write a story about it like a bit of a competition and it just makes you want to write more. It makes it more fun. We did that in Year 4 so it was really good.

*(Year 5, interview)*

The move from an enjoyment of testing to the full gravitas of its importance for the future seems to be a process which is complete by Year 6. There was also some evidence that the target setting throughout the educational experience had been internalised to such an extent that, on an individual level, it went beyond the extrinsic to the considering and setting of personal goals. The response, in the light of having taken the SATs, had become more mixed in that there was more self-awareness of those who did not achieve or who measured unfavourably in terms of their peers. Whilst the boys still used language such as 'fun' to describe the experience, they also indicated a greater level of discomfort in not achieving

and this is clearly signalled in phrases such as 'beat yourself up' which point to a more rigorous self-policing and critiquing of performance. Measuring via targets had become a mechanism for public humiliation, 'you have to say to everyone..' and a more serious competitive atmosphere is also seen in the growing awareness of 'cheating' where not only outcomes are measured but the means by which they are achieved. For the first time in the interviews, some participants actively railed against the idea of SATs and indicated a certain level of resentment at the success of others. This is a change which can perhaps be explained by the move away from the identification with cultural resources which appeal to childhood to more adult codes of masculinity (Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2007). Perhaps having already settled into a hierarchical school culture where status is informed by academic success, the maturing of boys begins to bring with it an understanding of the importance of competition beyond mere games. Therefore, as school progresses, the boys become more aware of the implications of success and failure beyond the classroom and its impact on their future:

Harry: I like to challenge myself and like set me a target and the next time I like to beat my target. I enjoy like the..like the puzzles and things

J: Right, so you like targets. When you did your SATs then did you enjoy doing things like SATs?

Harry: Yes

J: Does everybody enjoy doing their SATs?

Thomas: Yes, it was fun, but in other ways it wasn't fun. It was like you wanted to make [overtalking]. You wanted to put your hard work into a result.

J: Right ok. Did anybody not enjoy their SATs? [pause] Do you just like competing? Do you like knowing where you are...whether you're first or whether you're second, or whether...

All: Yes

J: Do you like having a grade?

All: Yes

J: Does anybody not like having a grade?

Thomas: Sometimes

Jonny: Sometimes if you get a grade that you're.. don't know, you beat yourself up about it. It's embarrassing to say..like sometimes if you get a bad score and then you have to say to everyone, I got a bad score [unclear] a good score

J: If you could do away with SATs and not have any SATs and not have grades, would you do that?

Jonny: Yes

J: Would you rather have no grades?

Jonny: Or like everybody's cheating because some people have extra help than others. It's like people get better grades than other people but it just doesn't help.

J: Because they've had extra help?

Jonny: Yes

*(Year 6, group discussion)*

Responses from most of the boys suggested that the focus on success measured by testing was somewhat of a driving force in the consideration of any academic subject so that by Year 6, even when boys were asked which subjects they favoured and the reasons for this, it was discussed in terms of performance rather than enjoyment:

J: Do you think...do you like maths as much as you like literacy?

James : I used to, really. When I was younger down, it was kind of the opposite. I was good at...I was better at maths than literacy. But now I'm better at literacy than maths. It's..it changes for me. It goes up, down, up, down, up, down

*(Year 6, interview)*

### **5.2.2 Focus on the future**

The literature review points to a change in the idea of a 'traditional' construction of masculinity; one which relies on the advantage of physical strength to take up the patriarchal role of the breadwinner. Instead, contemporary boys must be prepared for a workplace which requires more emphasis on the skills of literacy – both written and communicative. This shift appears to be evident in the connection made by the boys between school and future employment. One important recurring pattern in both the focus groups and individual interviews was the connection between SATs/academic success and the future. There was clearly a message being reinforced that doing well in school, even at the primary stage, was essential for a 'good' job later in life. This message had been so successfully conveyed that many of the boys gave this as the reason to perform well in SATs, even as early as Year 4. The connection with jobs and future income was directly related to a SATs grade in the minds of boys such as Sam, so that there was already some element of boys accepting a future status based on performance at Primary School. Indeed, future employment was spoken of as an important part in constructing their future status as men:

J:            Would you prefer it if there were no SATs?

Ollie:        No, I wouldn't like that because SATs gets you a good job

J: Why is it important to you to do well?

Moses: I want to do well because this is like what primary school has been leading me up to, and I also want to do well because then I sort of do good in lots of things in the future, so yes.

J: So you mean like a job and things like that?

Moses: Yes

J: What kind of job would you like to do?

Moses: Something of engineer type thing.

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

J: Is it important to be good at schoolwork to you?

Rob: Yes, because you can get good jobs by it. If you don't like schoolwork and you're a bit lazy with it, I think you're just not going to get very far in life

J: What kind of job do you think you might get?

Rob: I want to be an engineer when I'm older, like making quite famous stuff....I'm going to be an aeronautical engineer so I'm going to make planes.

J: ....And you need a good education for that?

Rob: Yes

*(Year 4, interview)*



J: Ok, is it important to you to get a good result [in your SATS]  
Sam: Yes  
J: Why?  
Sam : Because if you get a good result, then you know what you can do, and then you know what sort of job you can get.

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: Why do you think it's important to do well at school?  
Isaac: So when you're older you can get a good job

*(Year 5, interview)*

This sentiment was echoed by all of the boys in Year 4 and it is this connection between grades and future employment which gives the testing its value and purpose. This notion was somewhat ingrained as at the first attempt to try and lead the boys away from the idea of 'success' as solely relating to grades there was a move to make a connection to the process of achieving academically rather than on other ways of being 'successful':

J: Is it important to be good at your schoolwork?  
All: Yes

Isaac T: I would say most of the time

Jay: After I want to get a good job

J: So it's important to you to get a good job? Are there any other reasons why you want to be successful?

Nick: Maybe just like to get better grades, to get a really good job

Callum: So you can be clever

J: So it's important to be clever?

All: Yes

J: So, what other ways can you be successful at school

Nick: Getting things right

Toby: Better concentrating

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

As the interviews move through to older groups in Year 5, it is apparent that the concern with future employment prospects has become more entrenched so that there is even a questioning of content of study and how it is connected to 'real' life situations and the world of work. Literature such as the Boys Commission Report (Literacy Trust, 2012), outlines how boys' education should be delivered in practical and active ways which relate to real life situations, advice which is also echoed in reports on good practice such as that of Warrington and Younger (2005). It is therefore unclear whether the focus on employment which has been

instilled into the boys is driven by pedagogic recommendations adopted by teachers or simply a reflection of adult concerns for their future:

Moses: I've drawn a real house before which could actually be possible. I watched like this...my dad sometimes builds buildings and things for people and he had a bag of cement and I found out how much per brick, how much for that, and I measured out how much everything would be, how many glass panes I would need and everything. So I think that would definitely help if I wanted to be an engineer.

*(Year 5, interview)*

The competitive environment of school had been transposed onto the future so that even in discussion there is an underlying implication that jobs will indicate status. This is alluded to in the 'one-up- man-ship' of George's 'good job' versus Nick's 'decent, good job'. Year 5 also sees the beginning of some agency in terms of critiquing the teacher, not simply in terms of personality, but in doing a satisfactory job in teaching. There is a perceptible shift in the balance of power as the pupils grasp that they are 'customers' and the teacher is the 'service provider' which is perhaps driven by the modern consumer society culture:

Nick: I think she's pushing us too hard on the literacy, not the maths.

Isaac: Yes

Matthew: Maths is getting a bit too easy.

Nick: I mean, we're doing stuff that might not even help us. Like we're doing stuff from work during the winter

Lewis: Which doesn't really get you through life.

Nick: Yes, it doesn't really help you through life.

J: Are you bothered about school and how it gets you through life?

Isaac: Yes, I am.

Nick: Because I want to get a job.

George: I want to get a good job.

Nick : I want to get a decent, good job

J: Right then, so if I ask you then what is it, what does it mean to you to be successful at school. What would you need to have achieved to be successful?

Nick: Get, like, good levels

Adam: Good grades

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

The projection of the future was often quite detailed in the individual interviews and suggested that this had been thought about by the boys as plans were already in place for the direction their lives would take. This included quite mature

projections even amongst boys in Year 5, as exemplified by Adam. Certainly there was a firm grasp on the idea that the income provided by a job could impact upon quality of life so that the consumer society was very much in evidence:

J: You said it's important to do well in your subjects. Why is it important?

Adam: So that you can get a good job in life

J: ...is it important to have money?

Adam: Yes, because if you don't have any money, where are you going to get your clothes, your house, buy your kids anything?

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: So you just said to me that, you know, it's a dream because you make a lot of money. Do you think it's important to make a lot of money?

Isaac: Oh it depends if you want a lot of money or you don't, but I would have a lot of money because you'd be able to go on lots of holidays, get a nice house

J: Do you think you'd be happier if you had a lot of money and a decent job?

Isaac: Yes

J: Yes? Do you think most people would agree with you on that one?

Isaac: Yes

*(Year 5, interview)*

The importance of good jobs was expressed by all of the boys and for those in the final year, boyhood dreams were tempered with some mature and realistic consideration of what was possible to the extent that for Jon, there was already a 'plan B' in place should his dreams of the premiership not be achieved. This implied a certain level of fear that not achieving academically would leave the participants vulnerable in the future; whatever the field, the future appeared to be an environment where everything must be competed for and the boys felt the need to prepare themselves for this:

J: Are you in...what [football] academy are you in? Stonetown?.....if you're really, really good and you're in the Academy then, do people look up to you because of that? Do people think, wow, that's cool to be in the academy?

Jon: Yes, but you've got to work hard at school as well

Seb: Oh, Jon, *you* don't really

Jon: You've got to...even if you're great, you've got to make plans if you..

Peter: Because not everybody will get into the top premiership team so you've still got to work hard..

J: Do you think about the future, Peter and getting a good job?

Peter: Yes

J: Do you think it's important to work hard at school to get a good job?

Peter: Yes

Seb: Yes

*(Year 6, group discussion)*

### **5.2.3 Progression and the Role of the Teacher**

The role of the teacher as a tool for progression starts to be commented on in Year 5 in terms of assessing performance for competency in teaching as opposed to 'liking' versus 'not liking' their personality which is the main concern amongst the Year 4 participants. In Years 5 and 6, there is a clearer focus on achievement over and above enjoyment and a more critical approach to assessing whether or not the teacher is engendering progress through their teaching skills. The acceptance of the younger children that the teacher teaches has been replaced by a more critical judgement of what a good teacher is:

J: So the teacher makes a big difference to you?

Sam: Like probably, to progress

J: So what's more important, to have fun or to progress?

Sam: Like, probably to progress

Dan: You need to be focussed

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

Moses: I don't like French.

J: Why don't you like French?

Moses: Because all they'll teach is like [inaudible], she doesn't speak to you, or speaks to you in French. Like, what are you saying? I mean how are we supposed to progress in what we're doing?

*(Year 5, interview)*

Nick: I think she's pushing us too hard on the literacy, not the maths.

Isaac: Yes

Matthew: Maths is getting a bit too easy.

Nick: I mean, we're doing stuff that might not even help us. Like we're doing stuff from work during the winter

*(Year 5, group discussion)*



#### **5.2.4 Pressure to compete and conflicting emotions**

The picture presented by the boys was often one of conformity in terms of meeting the expectations to perform academically. Boys were not ridiculed for their academic prowess and instead this played a part in being admired by others; to achieve academically was an aspirational construct of masculinity. Certainly, it had been woven into the fabric of the hierarchy and many displayed an intrinsic motivation to compete and progress as these values had been instilled at a deep level. However, whilst all of the boys stressed the value of achieving academically, they recognised that their behaviour did not always meet expectations. There was also a range of emotions expressed towards the pressure of competing and achieving academic success which was not all positive. For some, such as Jon, the process was discussed as a necessary evil and a system to which he had to submit in order to gain. Again, this confirmed Alloway's (1997) assertion that boys from middle class backgrounds often engage with academia as a means to an end. A pattern was recognised in which the gravity of achieving would become more serious with age and the notion of 'doing well' was bound up in fears or hopes for the future and not necessarily in the love of learning for its own sake. For Jon, the competing had somewhat taken over the idea of learning and the school environment was framed within the context of 'being good at it'. The final testing was the impetus to focus and his self-discipline and willingness to study independently, despite not particularly enjoying it, is a

measure of the degree to which being graded highly was of particular value to him. This consistent theme amongst the older boys perhaps calls into question the rejection of being seen to strive for academic success and the desirable construction of 'effortless achievement' (Jackson and Dempster, 2009):

J: Do you think a lot of subjects in primary school are made fun for you?

Jon: Yes

J: How do you think it will be different in the [high] school?

Jon: I think it will be, like, serious. Like not...I don't know how to explain.

Like it will be harder

J: A lot of people said they like learning because they want good results...

Jon: Yes

J: ...They're thinking about getting a job in the future. Do you sometimes like learning just because it's fun to be here and nice to learn?

Jon: No, I want to...not because it's fun because if someone could have said, do what you want...you don't have to come to school, but you can get a good score, I would probably do that

J: Yes. Ok. That's fair enough.

Jon: But then like. I like to be good at school, so that's why I concentrate in class.

J: Did you get a good score in the SATs?

Jon: Yes

- J: Did you concentrate more when you knew the SATs were coming?
- Jon: Yes. Like in Year 5, I wasn't. But as soon as we started in Year 6 and I didn't know it was as close as it was, then Mrs Gilbert was saying, like, it's getting close now, it's only like a month..
- J: Yes
- Jon: I was like, like, whoa. And I started practising on my own every night

*(Year 6, interview)*

For others, such as Charlie, the focus on targets and measuring himself against his peers appeared to be an overwhelming burden which he found intrusive and a process which he viewed as actively hampering his performance. Being compared was discussed in terms of feeling vulnerable and exposed with a worry that he could not 'keep up'. This was further evidence of the role played by academic achievement in the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the perceived subordination and marginalisation of those boys who felt unable to compete:

- Charlie: In a classroom environment, I sort of feel like, don't feel like I worked my best, but if I'm at home, I'm in my room I feel like, ok, I can do this.
- J: When you're on your own and people are not watching and it's just you and that thing, you can do it a lot better?

Charlie: Yes...and especially when teachers pick, I feel like I don't have a choice what to do.

Charlie: Sometimes it's writing and sometimes it's the thinking. Because sometimes we have to copy something out which I think is too easy, but everybody else thinks it's easy as well. But my hand moves slower because I'm used to doing more detail, but then I start wishing, then, it feels like I'm under pressure

Charlie: Talking's a bit better, but we have to do writing again. And sometimes even with just talking, I find it hard because everybody else is doing it, like, with me, and I'm just not sure about it

*(Year 6, interview)*

Other boys, whilst articulating the values of working hard and the importance of academic achievement, did not quite manage the behaviour which might help towards this. Whilst there was evidence of the use of rebellion and inappropriate humour to deflect from engagement with schoolwork, as described by Barnes (2012), interestingly there did seem to be some self awareness in behaviour which was not conducive to learning and the few who admitted to this expressed some

disappointment in themselves for failing to conform rather than communicating any desire to actively rebel against the system or to maintain a blasé image in front of their peers:

J:           What about being good at your schoolwork then? Is that important?

Billie:       Yes, it's a lot more important than football

J:           ...do you try hard to do well?

Billie:       I try hard

J:           What kind of things get in the way of you trying hard?

Billie:       Just being silly on the carpet and stuff

J:           Ok, are you silly on the carpet?

Billie:       Yes

*(Year 5, interview)*

### **5.3 Summary**

This chapter has shown, that contrary to the literature which outlines research at secondary school, there is a high level of engagement by younger boys with school culture that promotes academic progress and achievement. This culture also appears to be pervasive to the extent that there is a focus on progress and

results which eclipses the value of learning and knowledge for its own sake and can lead to some worries and concerns for the future. Certainly, the connection to future employment and material gain and status is recognised even by the youngest participants. The next chapter examines in more detail, how the boys position themselves in order to accommodate succeeding at school with their masculine identities. It explores how boys define desirable performances of masculinity and how these are enacted in the school context.

## **Chapter 6: How do boys construct, manage and negotiate their masculine identities within the primary school context?**

### **6.1 Introduction**

As noted by Rowan, 'every individual boy accesses, performs and transforms multiple versions of masculinity in various contexts' (2002:67). For this study, that context is the primary school environment, a place and time when boys are building a sense of themselves and carefully negotiating peer and societal expectations of how they need to perform as young men. Whilst their 'grown up' future may seem distant, the last chapter shows how they are shaped by both hopes and concerns of what that future may bring and have internalised the mature considerations which have already been passed to them of the need to take their place in a consumer driven culture where competition and material gain are a necessary and even desirable facet of modern living.

The literature chapters outline the pressures which may be brought to bear on young boys and the messages they hear about what it is to be masculine in our society. This evidence points to the value of scrutinising how 'being a boy' is achieved through the lens of both post structural and materialist theories of masculinities. This chapter discusses how the boys in this study negotiate their

gender identity both in and out of the classroom, and how they define what they consider to be more desirable constructions of masculinity.

## **6.2 Exploring masculine identities**

For the purposes of the study, questions were framed so that there was a consistent focus on the school context. As a researcher, it was a challenge to discuss masculinities with such young children as the meta-language required was perhaps too complex and the idea of actively constructing oneself beyond comprehension. I therefore explored their experience in terms of what was required to be socially successful as a boy in the school environment which was sometimes set against their perception of how this might differ from the experience of being a girl or of other boys who may behave differently from themselves.

Previous studies of boys at Primary School have pointed to the contradictions between constructing a hegemonic masculinity (Renold, 2001, Francis, 1997, 1998) and an engagement with study. This is due to the need to display a physicality which is perhaps at odds with the more passive activities required for study. Consequently, academia is often framed as being feminine which conflicts with the projection of heteronormativity (Connell 1989, Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, Martino, 1999, Brozo, 2005). The evidence presented in chapter 5 contradicts



such findings in that the boys in this study were found to be invested in achieving academically. However, this need appeared to be absorbed into the construction of an aspirational and hegemonic masculinity by being linked to competition with others and achievement. Contrary to Francis' (1997, 1998) study, boys who managed to achieve highly at school were admired rather than ridiculed and this is confirmed in the following chapter where to 'show off' academically, within limits, is deemed acceptable. This perhaps supports the more recent findings by Francis (2011) of what she describes as the 'repackaging' of hegemonic masculinity where a 'real boy' construction is being reworked by academically successful boys to produce a 'renaissance masculinity' (2011:456).

From the focus groups, however, and the interviews, patterns emerged of how boys may be grouped in terms of adherence to different preferences when at play; those who indulged in physical sports and those who did not. In particular there was evidence of a dominating culture of football which confirmed previous studies which point to the important role played by sporting prowess in the creation of hegemonic masculinity, (Renold, 2005, Swain, 2006, Clark and Paetcher, 2007, Bhana, 2008). However, unlike the evidence offered in studies such as that by Bhana (2008), my findings show that whilst to excel at sports carried with it high status and even popularity, physical displays of aggression and violence were spoken of as being unacceptable.

During contact with the boys there were discussions which highlighted the ranking of each other in terms of strength and their ability to compete well although the latter included a variety of both physical and non-physical pursuits; perhaps the most desirable construction of masculinity therefore was one in which prowess in both physical and academic pursuits was demonstrated. Overall, there was a keen focus on the measuring of 'being good at things' both in and out of the classroom and all of the boys appeared to be very aware of where they stood in relation to others. This was a process which appeared to have begun with academic measuring and then bled to all other pursuits and activities within the Primary School environment. Beyond this, however, there was also evidence that, in what was often framed as a highly competitive environment, there was a great deal of value placed on being co-operative, a good team player and kind to others. This seemed to reflect a noteworthy dichotomy which mirrored that of the school environment where the children were explicitly taught about being kind to others and the value of co-operation and equality whilst implicitly being in constant competition with their peers.

Despite the focus on competition there were also other desirable ways to construct masculinity so that it was viewed positively by peers. There was the emergence of the idea that a certain amount of 'rebellion' was entertaining to friends and a way to be noticed and be popular. This did appear to be the beginning of a construction of masculinity seen in studies at secondary school in which boys who are unable to achieve turn to 'laddish' behaviour and low level disruption

expressed in the guise of humour as a strategy of self-worth (Jackson, 2004, Barnes 2012). However, there was no evidence that this was a construction of masculinity that was admired beyond its entertainment value or that it was admired enough to influence boys who were academic achievers (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). On the contrary, this was 'policed' by all involved so that there was an understanding of how much 'cheekiness' was acceptable and this was only up to a point where it did not impact upon learning and academic performance, after which it was resented and viewed rather negatively. Certainly, to be recognised as being witty or funny was a highly prized attribute but not to the point of continual low level disruption in class.

There was a clear indication that the boys within each year operated as a gender based community of practice which was distinct from that of the girls, which mirrored the 'borderwork' suggested by Thorne (1993) which characterizes the ways in which children form single-sex friendship groups that serve to create and strengthen gender boundaries. This was more apparent as interviews moved on through to older year groups and the practice of sport became less egalitarian and was spoken of as being a masculine 'domain'. By Year 6, some terms appeared such as 'girly' and 'tomboy' which marked the divisions between what was acceptable and normative behaviour for girls and boys. Thus, it was in this discursively created distinction that it was best exemplified how the masculine identities of the boys were developed dynamically through social interaction and how this was informed by much broader structures of societal expectations

(Connell, 1995, 2005). Furthermore, it explained how boys who did not achieve or even strive for a hegemonic construct of masculinity 'internally' were complicit in maintaining the gender order as they wished to present themselves as being distinct from girls (Gottzen, 2011).

### **6.3 Being Distinct From Girls**

One of the main themes which emerged throughout the conversations was the binary approach to gender in which to be a boy was a culture distinct from being a girl. This mirrored studies such as those by Martino (1999, 2000) who found that gendered identities were often fashioned around compulsory heterosexuality involving the avoidance of feminine behaviours. As suggested by Mac an Ghail to 'be a 'real boy' was to publicly be in opposition to and distance oneself from the feminine and feminized versions of masculinity' (2000:172).

It was clear that these two groups had different communities of practice (Paetcher, 2007) which became more noticeable as the years progressed and the children identified with gender appropriate activities such as 'makeup' for girls and 'football' for boys. This mirrored the pastimes of older children and so confirmed Skattebol's (2006) assertions that much of the concerns of young boys lie in 'becoming' and trying to emulate the behaviour of older boys and men. It also confirmed how

early years education is a pivotal time in the construction of gender and describes how, as suggested by Foucault, 'rigid adherence to gender roles becomes the norm and peer cultures take on an active role in enforcing these (2000:76). Whilst the boys sought to understand themselves in terms of their positioning and status to other boys, they also identified themselves as part of a larger group of boys positioned against the girls. This was particularly noticeable in terms of expectations of behaviour which, it was suggested, was sometimes commented on by the teachers.

### ***6.3.1 Competition with the Girls***

From the grouping of boys academically to the framing of activities around competition, all of the boys seemed, for the most part, to be comfortable or at least accepting of this part of school life. In many cases this was discussed with an active sense of positivity, especially in the younger years where it was presented in a game-like format. It was apparent that the boys were driven to compete in a number of ways, both between themselves and as part of a larger group, against the girls:

Charlie: Sometimes, like with sport, you get split up into, like, 'boys races' and 'girls races' which, then it just depends on who's the...who's the best at that out of the boys and girls.

*(Year 6, interview)*

Despite this pitting of boys against girls in certain scenarios, none of the boys interviewed explicitly mentioned the academic performance of the girls unless directly asked, but instead focussed their conversation on where they stood as compared to other boys in their class. 'First' in a subject meant being the first amongst the boys and there were no instances of considering the girls within this hierarchy. This lack of inclusion appeared somewhat incongruous given that the majority of boys, particularly in the younger years, expressed the view that there were no subjects more suited to girls rather than boys. This demonstrated the extent to which the values of gender equality had been promoted successfully following the feminist movement:

J: Do you think some subjects are more suitable for boys than girls?

Seb: I mean, any subject is good for anybody really, because anybody can do anything.

*(Year 6, interview)*

- J: What about science and maths and literacy? Is everybody just as good as everybody else? It doesn't matter whether it's a boy or a girl...
- Isaac: It doesn't matter because Daisy again, she's good at literacy. Most people are good at everything like maths.
- J: So it's just a mix?
- Isaac: Yes

*(Year 5, interview)*

- J: Ok. Do you think literacy is more a subject for girls or for boys or for both?
- Sam: For both, I think.

*(Year 5, interview)*

This view was prevalent throughout Years 4 and 5 and also extended to sport and the playing of football:

- J: Do you have girls playing in your football games?
- Billie: Sometimes, yes. We've got Holly, Eloisa, Daisy and other people. In Year 5, like near the start, all the girls used to play football against me

and Ben...

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: Do you like to play sport where it's mixed boys and girls?

Isaac: Yes, it gives people....you know if you're good at something or not.  
But people don't make fun of them if they're rubbish. Say, if someone can't hit the ball with the bat, that's them, they can't do it.

*(Year 5, interview)*

### **6.3.2 Different Interests**

During Year 5 and into Year 6, whilst the view of academic subjects remained largely unchanged, there was a perceptible shift in the idea that boys have different interests from girls, and sports and physical activity had become largely associated with masculinity. The enactment of hegemonic masculinity through the physical body is a phenomenon which has been well documented (Clark and Paetcher, 2007, Newman et al, 2006, Swain, 2006) and in this study also, physical prowess in sport was spoken of as been greatly admired, especially when the sport in question was football. Whilst many of the boys in the earlier years spoke of girls having an interest in sport also, this appears to wane as the gender



boundaries become more distinct. This is expressed by Charlie who specifically points to the process of girls 'giving up on football'.

J: Do you think some subjects are better for girls and others for boys?

Charlie: It depends. Sometimes, like with sport, you get split up into 'boys races' 'girls races'.

J: Are some sports better for boys then?

Charlie: It depends. You could have a really fast girl, a really fast boy, and a really slow boy. The boys would come first, the girl would come second, and the boys would come third.

J: Yes, I see what you mean.

Charlie: So, it's mixed.

J: What about other sports like football?

Charlie: Football? I'd say that girls and boys are equal at it. Just girls, lots of girls have given up on football, but lots of them are also really interested.

J: Right, ok. Do you think they just give it up more and more as they get older?

Charlie: Yes.

*(Year 5, interview)*

This is reinforced by Seb in Year 6 who introduces the term 'tomboy' for girls who are still playing sport rather than having moved on to 'girly' interests such as 'makeup'. The tone of utterance for both of these gives credence to the claim by Thorne (1993) that girls and objects associated with femininity are often associated with a polluting presence, the reverse of which is rarely seen. Seb also explains that what is considered to be 'impressive' in boys is no longer the same for girls who are now more likely to be admired for their academic achievement than their physical prowess. Whilst he rejects the idea of sporting achievement as desirable for girls he nonetheless implies that how they look is becoming increasingly important as he positions them as being predominantly interested in 'makeup'. Unlike Charlie and Billie in Year 5, Seb makes a clearer distinction between the communities of practice of boys and girls which seem to be more separate than in previous years and includes the idea that it is perhaps no longer gender appropriate for girls to be interested in games which are 'rough'.

- Seb: Yes, like girls are more....it's impressive for girls, like, if they're good at maths. But it's not as impressive if they're good at sport.
- J: Why? Is sport a boy's thing is it?
- Seb: It's like, because girls are more girly with makeup and stuff. And it's like, we call people tomboys and stuff, because they play football. It's quite rough.

*(Year 6, interview)*

Isaac also explains that whilst some sport may be acceptable for girls, football has become a game strongly associated with boys. He also adopts a binary approach that was apparent in all of the discussions with the boys where the genders were often discussed as large homogenous groups for whom defining characteristics can be readily identified. This, once again, confirms the importance of creating a distinct culture from the girls regardless of status 'internally' amongst the boys:

J: Do you like PE?

Isaac: Yes, it's good. We do a lot of things that I like , so I've got some people if I'm.....like gymnastics, I'm not really a big fan of that. That's how the girls like it, so it's fair on everyone because sometimes we do football as a season and then the girls don't want to do it. Then we do gymnastics and the girls really don't like that. But then, the one that we're doing now that everyone likes is rounders.

*(Year 5, interview)*

The association between masculinity and physical activity is further evidenced in Adam's comments where male staff are highlighted as being associated with sport and learning outdoors which is framed as being oppositional to the interests of females. This echoes the concerns pointed to in the literature review of a widely held belief that female teachers are unable to understand that needs of boys.

What is noteworthy is that whilst a male teacher was responsible for arranging playground football, other outdoor learning activities were timed as part of the curriculum so that all of the children had an equal opportunity to utilise the woodland learning environment. Therefore, Adam's perception of being outdoors more with the male teacher was not, in fact, accurate. The inception of the woodland outdoor learning classroom was driven by the female Deputy Head who had a keen interest in sport and in terms of that year, she had used it most often in order to develop a strategy for its use within the school curriculum. On further investigation and as part of observations prior to the interviews, it was noted that there were several female teachers who were largely active in developing sports at the school and running clubs, as well as male teachers. There were also two male teachers at the school who took very little interest in sport and one who was routinely complained of for rarely appearing outside for playground duty. The 'making dens' activity mentioned by Adam was also carried out with his female teacher so that his perception that male teachers would spend more time outside was a projection based on his developing perception of masculinity and men. This demonstrates the extent to which masculinities are culturally and discursively constructed and that the very fact that they are formed extrinsically is central to how they are perceived (Adams & Savran, 2002). This connection of men with physical activity also demonstrates the desirability of enacting masculinity through the physical body:

J: If you could change school in any way to make it better for you, what would you do? How would you make it more interesting?

Adam: By getting more boy teachers.

J: Yes? Have you had men teachers since you've been here?

Adam: Yes. We've got Mr Holland in Year 4

J: Ok. Why is that better?

Adam: Because he does more outdoor stuff with us. Because when you've got a teacher which is a girl we always stay in the classroom.

J: Right okay. So you like to be outside?

Adam: Yes

J: Are there any activities that you really, really like? Like the woodland or the allotment or...

Adam: The woodland, yes.

J: Yes? What's good about the woodland?

Adam: So you get to play around and sharpen sticks and make dens.

J: Who organises the [football] games in school when you're in the playground? Who sort of gets it together and.....

Adam: It's like Mr Wakefield, the one....the sporty teachers.

*(Year 5, interview)*

### **6.3.3 Boys and girls are just...different**

The emergent idea of the separate communities of practice for genders is exemplified by Moses' struggle to define exactly how each group does behave differently whilst, at the same time, acknowledging a shared truth, that this is the case. There is also an implication in his lack of knowledge of the practices of the girls that perhaps as the school years progress, there is less mixed interaction as they follow paths of different interests such as 'football' and 'making up dances'.

J: Do you think girls have got to behave more?

Moses: No, it's just boys are.....I haven't really been a girl though...

J: Yes, that's true

Moses: But boys argue about lots of things. Girls, I'm not too sure.

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: Right. What kind of things do [the girls] do while you're playing football, then?

Isaac: Skipping, races, dancing. Making their own dance up and then sharing it for another class....

*(Year 5, interview)*

Seb also points to very generalised differences between boys and girls in terms of 'fighting' and points to a more emotional and less physical response to arguments:

J: Do the teachers take that seriously if you have a bit of a fight?

Seb: Well, sometimes they do, like, they do try to break it up. But sometimes it doesn't work. But we do get back together at a certain point

J: Do the girls fight like that?

Seb: They don't fight like, kick and trip up and....they just shout at each other and leave each other, and talk about each other in a quiet voice. And then it...and then it takes a teacher just to bond them back together.

*(Year 6, interview)*

#### **6.3.4 Expectations of Behaviour**

Whilst teachers were not spoken of as routinely setting gender groups in competition with each other academically, comments pointed to this as a strategy with regards to maintaining 'good' behaviour. Often the teachers were discussed as highlighting behavioural expectations for boys by making a comparison with

girls in a way that they did not do between the boys themselves – a pattern of practice which shows how school can act as an agent in defining gender order, described by Kimmel (1996) as a ‘hidden curriculum’ of reinforcing acceptable forms of behaviour. This appeared to have resulted, by Year 6, in some association between compliant behaviour and feminine attributes. Conversely, this also places the girls in a more passive position of watching, ‘laughing’ and providing some admiration for the rebellious behaviour of the boys. Again, as with the general perception of the male teachers as being more sporty, there is little evidence to substantiate the view that girls are more well behaved as by Moses’ admission, ‘it depends what sort of boy’. However, there was a belief expressed by the majority of boys that they were naughtier and disciplined more than the girls; this was somewhat at odds with the idea that there was, somehow, a greater expectation for girls to be well behaved. The idea that girls were expected to display more passive behaviour perhaps reflects Francis’ (2011) study which found that whilst boys were able to ‘repackage’ hegemony to include academic success as a desirable attribute, conversely, girls were still unable to ‘repackage’ femininity in the same way to include an active interest in physical pursuits and sports:

J: Are the girls better behaved?

Seb: Yes. Yes. And whenever a boy just says something, like a a joke, they will laugh at it.



J: Right. Are they..do you think it's because the girls are expected to be better behaved?

Seb: They are, like what I said, they are kind of like...whenever the teacher...when some boys are messing about, a teacher will always pick a girl to say, oh yes, this girl's doing what I want *you* to do.

*(Year 6, interview)*

J: Do you think that girls are better behaved than the boys?

Sam: Yes. Yes, quite a lot actually. Although some of the boys don't get into trouble at all or they rarely get into trouble.

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: Do you think girls are better behaved than boys?

Moses: It depends what sort of boys. But most of the time, yes, because we've got about three or four boys in our class who are sort of naughty and we've got two or three who are good. But the rest...we get told off at least once or twice every two months.

J: Do boys in general get told off more than the girls?

Moses: Probably.

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: Do you think girls are better behaved than boys?

Billie: Yes

J: Yes. Why do you think that might be?

Billie: Because girls aren't as silly as boys

J: Why?

Billie: I don't really know

J: Do you think boys get away with being silly more than girls do?

Billie: No

J: No? Do you think that girls get away with being silly?

Billie: Yes

J: Why?

Billie: Because we do it all the time, and we get told off, and when the girls do it once or twice, they don't really get told off

J: No? Do you get shouted at?

Billie: Well, not really bad. We just get like a warning or a '3'

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: So back to the question I asked before: Do you think girls are better behaved than boys?

Isaac: Yes. The boys are like, more hyper and they want to do more stuff, and so they don't like doing work. That's how boys are really.

- J: Is it important that? Is it part of being a boy..being a little bit cheeky, a little bit naughty sometimes?
- Isaac: Yes, sometimes we want to be a bit like mischief and that. Kind of have a bit of a joke like on the carpet and that
- J: Why do you think that is?
- Isaac: Well, we just like it really. It's just like, we're all basically friends, so we like to have a bit of a laugh, but sometimes we do it in the wrong time and the wrong ways
- J: Do you think you get away with it more, then? Do you think if you're a boy and you're a bit naughty, it's more expected that you're a bit naughty?
- Isaac: Yes, but if the girls do something, what the boys have already done.... so we do this thing: ones, twos, threes and fours. 'One' is really good, 'two' is where you start on, 'three' is where you get sent out and 'four', you get excluded for a day. And like I said last time, we're not allowed to say this word, but this girl said it and she didn't even get told off, and this boy really got told off; he got a four. So I think it's not really fair on some.
- J: Have you ever been sent out of the class?
- Isaac: Me? Yes, two or three times

*(Year 5, interview)*

The idea of more compliant behaviour is also linked by Joel to a greater success in schoolwork. When questioned about whether some subjects are better for girls, only he states that there is a difference. This, however, appears to be linked to measuring performance rather than any innate ability in subject itself. This success, he attributes to a willingness amongst girls to get on with the work because they are under greater pressure to do so and their need to plan; an idea also found in Martino's study (1999). Will does not explicitly comment on how the compliance of girls is achieved but in discussion he references the subtle differences in the ways in which girls and boys are disciplined and groomed at school in terms of acceptable behaviour with reference to physical fighting which thus, reinforces normative behaviour between genders. This is indicative of the strong influence of school in the construction of certain types of masculinities, as suggested by both Mac An Ghail (1994) and Connell (2005) who described how teachers impose a gendered regime.

J: Are there any subjects that you learn which you think are better for girls than for boys?

Joel: English

J: Why?

Joel: Because I think most girls are better at English than boys, because in the class, like, all the girls finish before. Well, there're about one or two boys that finish, when like, six girls are finished

J: Why do you think that is?

Joel: I just think that they work harder than boys in general

J: Why do they work harder than boys? Do they...have they got to?

Joel: They feel that they've got more pressure on them than we do

J: Ok, why?

Joel: Because they...girls mainly push themselves more, because they want to...they, like I said, plan ahead

J: Do you think they need to plan ahead more?

Joel: Not really

J: No? Why don't the lads feel the same pressure then?

Joel: I don't know. Boys mainly just take it a step at a time, and girls, like, plan things

J: Are they better behaved?

Joel: Most of them, yes

J: Why do you think they are better behaved?

Joel: I don't know

J: That is a difficult question. Do you think girls are taught to behave themselves more?

Joel: Yes..... Like your table manners and stuff like that. Girls do more like that than boys do. Like my friends..I still hold my knife and fork and cut things up, but some of them, like my friend Jack, he will just pick up a massive piece of turkey up, like this, and just eat it off there. Where most girls would get a knife and fork, cut tiny pieces off and

eat them

J: Do you think they're taught that because it's not ladylike and things like that?

Joel: Yes

J: Have they got to be more on the straight and narrow? Are boys allowed to be a bit rougher?

Joel: Well the mums don't say anything, or the dads, but they are different at school than they think

J: Do you think the boys get away with being rough, then, or....

Joel: No

J: No?

Joel: Not really. Boys...like some of the teachers they're, oh, you're just playing, like play fighting

J: Yes?

Joel: But when girls have a fight, it's always, 'you need to sort it out' because girls never really fight or anything

*(Year 6, interview)*

#### **6.4 Different sorts of boy**

Acknowledged within the interviews was the idea that not only were there different communities of practice for boys and girls but there were also different constructions of masculinity or different 'sorts of boy' and this pattern began to emerge most clearly when discussing behaviour, or rather, 'naughty' behaviour. Whilst it can be seen above that there are suggestions that girls do indulge in poor behaviour in the classroom including 'falling out', it was more routinely associated with some particular boys. Whilst they were in the minority, it did appear that they represented the notion that boys were more inclined to rebel and were generally less compliant. This could indicate an emergent culture of rebellion and the beginning of the 'laddish' behaviour as a self worth strategy which is so commonly seen in secondary education (Jackson, 2004, Barnes, 2012). Here, however, such behaviour does not compete against the prevailing culture of the need to do well at school and to exhibit compliant behaviour as expected by teachers and parents. This could either point to the emergence of the hegemonic construction of a 'renaissance boy' (Francis, 2011) who engages with school or confirm the assertion by Bartholomaeus (2012) that younger boys are unable to enact some stereotypical features of hegemonic masculinity due to age and lack of agency.

Throughout the interviews, a pattern began to emerge of a construction of masculinity which was conceptualised in its distinction of what it was to be a boy

as defined by its 'otherness' in terms of what it was to be a girl; in this model, boys were naughtier, more rebellious, preferred more physical activity, were tougher and more aggressive. However, beyond this, the complex reality was acknowledged that many boys did not fit into this pattern and in fact, the boys who were naughty and physically aggressive were in the minority. Hence, many of the interviews contained very contradictory statements in terms of boys/girls as a binary concept versus the lived experience of the boys in the school. This was seen particularly in conversation about the need for boys to be 'tough' and when discussing which boys were interested in physical sports.

#### **6.4.1 *Being tough***

Being 'tough' was discussed both in terms of being physically and emotionally robust and these two concepts were sometimes linked in conversation as the idea of 'toughness' was not just about being physically active but linked to being aggressive and fighting. This was particularly prevalent in the older years:

J: Do you think you've got to be quite physically tough as a boy?

Seb: Yes, because they expect you really, because sometimes boys get a bit angry at each other and it always goes down to a fight. So you've



got to be quite tough.

*(Year 6, interview)*

This is also echoed by Joel:

J: Have you got to be quite physically tough as a boy do you think?

Joel: Yes, because people keep saying , oh, how strong are you?

J: Who says that? Other friends?

Joel: Yes, other friends

*(Year 6, interview)*

As with the academic aspects of school life, physical strength is something which is clearly measured amongst the boys and is constructed as desirable as confirmed by empirical work which supports this idea of physical toil and toughness as being highly valued (Barrett, 2001, Brandth & Hiaugen, 2007, Sasson-Levy, 2007). All of the boys appeared to know where they stood in the ranking of strength and this appears in most of the interviews in Years 5 and 6 which echoes the assertion by Gill et al. (2005) that young men are acutely aware of their physicality in the creation of their identity and exercise agentic control over their bodies, doing so with reference to a normative masculinity. Here, whilst

Isaac appears to accept the need to be physically tough in the adult world, he appears to reject this in the school context which, at face value, challenges the findings of Frosh (2002) which suggested that many boys see masculinity and toughness as being inextricably linked. This rejection, however, seems to be contradictory as he still constructs strength as desirable by his obvious pride at his ranking and his participation in an aggressive sport where this strength is required for success:

J: [to be a policeman] do you have to be quite tough then....

Isaac: Yes

J: ...to do those jobs, be quite physically strong?

Isaac: Yes. It depends if you're working in the office or going out to get them

J: Do you think it's important to be physically tough at school, as a boy?

Isaac: No, you can be your normal self. You don't have to be tough

J: Do you know who's, like, the strongest in the class?

Isaac: Me and Toby Freeland

J: Right. But is that a good thing to be the strongest?

Isaac: It's just how you are, because, I do boxing lessons...

*(Year 5, interview)*

Toby also confirms that, in his opinion, the attribute of strength is desirable in the eyes of the other boys. This is linked to sporting prowess, particularly at football and thus is linked to popularity amongst peers:

Toby: I've got the most power in the class

J: Have you? Why have you got the most power?

Toby: Because when I shoot, it's just really powerful and people move out of the way like that

J: Ok. Is it important as a boy to be quite physically strong and tough do you think?

Toby: In football?

J: No, just in life

Toby: Yes

J: Yes? Do you know who is the strongest in your class and things like that?

Toby: Yes. I'm the second strongest. It's Isaac, then me and then Ben

J: Does it make you quite popular? Do all the lads think you're cool if you're...quite strong?

Toby: Yes

*(Year 5, interview)*

The link between the desirability of physical strength and the construction of masculinity was obvious throughout many of the interviews but this was often implied rather than explicitly commented on due to its connection with aggression which was largely condemned by the boys. This idea was somewhat contradictory so that whilst the discourse confirmed studies which details how hegemonic masculinity is enacted through physical strength and the ability to fight (Bhana, 2008, Keddie, 2006, Renold, 2005), aggression was widely condemned by the boys in terms of behaviour. There was, therefore, a rather complex and uneasy relationship with the idea of physical strength where it was desirable to be tough due to the assumption that physical fights would occur but aggression was labelled as a negative trait, both in themselves and in others; paradoxically, it was good to be able to 'handle' oneself in a fight and be known to be 'tough' but fighting itself was 'bad'. Certainly, a more desirable way to display physical strength was through sport, particularly in football where it was possible to show power and an acceptable form of aggression through competition. This was an attitude which became more embedded as the boys progressed through the years and was reinforced by an interest in the sport which then extended to the idolising of popular celebrity figures and the idealised lifestyle of the premier league footballer. Indeed, the physical prowess required to be good at football was linked to a highly desirable construction of masculinity, although this was not the only way to achieve 'popularity'. This mirrors the suggestion by both Connell (1987) and Messner (2007) that organised sport has perhaps become a mechanism by which boys can fill the void of the loss of being able to prove their physical dominance

through certain types of labour and that a common theme for sport is the instrumental approach to the body and the display of combative physical prowess.

## **6.5 Expressing emotion**

The literature review considers not only the pressures upon young boys to adapt and use their bodies in a way which is deemed to be socially desirable, but also the boundaries which may be set for them in terms of the expression of emotion and the contradictory messages they hear as gender roles evolve. Kindlon and Thompson, in their exploration of the psychological and emotional realities of boys, describe the attempt to maintain a manly facade and how this can result in a pervasive 'culture of cruelty' (1999:72) – one which can lead them into becoming either victims or aggressors. Both Pollack (1998) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that this way of enacting masculinity feeds into a dominant culture of heteronormative masculinity which may conflict with the expression of feelings and self disclosure often required in the learning of literacy. Mac An Ghaill (1994) and Martino (1995) also argue that in an educational setting, certain teacher ideologies emphasise and perpetuate rational, traditional forms of masculinity and help to prejudice boys against school subjects which could be linked to emotionality. However, emotions and emotional intelligence are now being

recognised as being essential for work and this presents a paradoxical message to young boys as they are prepared by school for the world of work.

The young boys in this study have grown up in a world where the need to embrace equality and diversity is part of the school curriculum. Also, addressed at school, are the social and emotional aspects of learning which involves the explicit discussion of how they feel and how they can consider the feelings of others. Evidence of this was seen in the consistent mention of 'being kind', 'helping others' and the implied values shown in the need to succeed but to do so through hard work and 'not cheating'. In all of the conversations, there was an overarching kindness in ensuring that peers were praised and their achievements noticed. However, the discussion with the boys about 'other kinds of boy' and the acceptability of showing emotion is somewhat contradictory in that it suggests that boys are able to cry but in keeping with a binary view of gender, girls cry more. In both the younger years and the older years crying has a correlation with strength:

J:           Okay. I asked about being physically tough. What about things like...  
you know like when you are out in the playground, if you fall over and  
scrape your knee. Do people cry?

Isaac:       Well, it depends how bad it is. Say if it's on the concrete, then  
probably, yes, if they've been scraped and all

- J: If it's a little bit of a scrape and they cry, is it still alright?
- Isaac: Well, it depends what he thinks, if he wants to go to First Aid, or if he doesn't. It depends how bad it is.
- J: Is it more okay for girls to cry or does it not make any difference?
- Isaac: Well, probably, yes, because they're a bit not as strong as boys.

*(Year 5, interview)*

In the discussion of 'other types of boy', Joel, equates, 'other types of boys' with being gay and whilst he links them to 'girly' interests he does not link them to being more likely to cry or express emotion. The complex messages about what it is to be masculine are reflected in his view that it is acceptable to cry but perhaps the time and place are important. In addition to this, he explicitly comments on the fact that such ideas come from 'the old days' which implies that he is explicitly aware of changing gender roles. Whilst he does point to the need for 'taking it on the chin', he also makes a connection with 'toughness' although does not cite the using of non-compliant behaviour as a way of expressing this:

- J: One final question then. Before we go then, we keep saying boys and girls, but obviously not all boys are the same. Are there different kinds of boys?
- Joel: Yes

J: What different kind of boys are there?

Joel: There are boys that go out with boys, like, gay people

J: Alright. Ok. Are they any good at football?

Joel: Some of them, yes, but they're mainly into girl things and you'll find most of their friends are girls

J: At school...not necessarily boys that want to go out with boys, but do you get quieter boys who prefer....

Joel: Yes, that prefer...yes, you have quieter boys. They're just quiet. And then you have boys that....because earlier on today, Elliot was in our group. He was crying and he never normally cries, because he's really quiet. And then all the teachers this morning were wondering why he was crying because he's always quiet

J: Is it alright to cry as a boy?

Joel: It depends where you are I think. At school you don't really want to cry, because you don't really want everybody.....because I know in our class, the girls fuss about you if you cry or something. So you have a lot coming up to you, 'oh are you alright?'

J: Is it alright for girls to cry?

Joel: Yes, I think it's more alright for girls to cry than boys

J: Is that something you've just been taught? Yes? Ok.

Joel: Yes, you've got to be a bit more, like, stronger about your feelings.

J: Right. Okay. Where do you think that idea comes from?...

Joel: I just think it comes from originally more like in the old days when we



were still fighting. And boys are normally strong. Like, tougher than girls, like planning and stuff like that

J: So, it's still like that now?

Joel: Yes, I think boys think to themselves, 'take it on the chin and then just do it'. But girls think, if they cry, they'll just cry

J: So you know when you're a bit naughty in your class, is that part of being a bit tougher emotionally? Showing you don't care as much about things?

Joel: No, not necessarily. Some of that's just..comedy

J: Is it important to be funny?

Joel: Yes, but not too funny that the teachers really don't like you, kind of Thing

*(Year 6, interview)*

## **6.6 Desirable constructions of masculinity and being 'popular'**

During the course of the study, it became clear that, to the boys, there was more than one context and one way of being within the school environment. This appeared to be delineated by supervision and the influence of the teacher so that inside the classroom and outside in the playground had a different set of expectations and 'rules' for behaviour. There was a complex negotiation of

balancing the expectations of behaviour by teachers versus what was viewed as desirable by peers, necessitating a careful balancing act in order to be popular or admired. This process has perhaps been best described by Hawley (2003) as being 'Machiavellian' in that it is most easily achieved by those who are best at balancing 'getting along' with 'getting ahead'.

As outlined in chapter 6, the boys point to a distinction between the cultures of boys and girls and this appeared to play a part in the expression of more desirable cultures of masculinity, especially as the school years progressed. This is outlined in extant research such as that by Fagot (1985) and Smith and Leaper (2005) who found that this 'two culture' expectation had a strong association with popularity in that it paved the way for gender specific socialisation resulting in different ways to be popular for girls and boys. Thus, in discussion, boys spoke highly of what was considered to be behaviour salient to gender such as participation in sport or being skilled in competitive games; an important factor in popularity also found by Mathur and Berndt, (2006). It was clear in speaking to the boys that in terms of popularity, toughness was certainly an attribute which was prized although this was not viewed as positive when expressed through aggression. Therefore, prowess at sport was continually discussed as it allowed for toughness to be expressed through the more pro-social outlet of athleticism. In particular, a common theme throughout most of the conversations was the importance of football.

### **6.6.1 Being good at football**

- J: Okay, I'm going to ask you, then. What does it mean to be successful at school? What does it mean to *you* to be successful?
- Jay: Happy
- J: Happy. Okay. So you will be successful at school if you're happy? Have you got anything different you would say?
- Alfie: Enjoying myself
- J: So what other ways can you be successful at school...I'm thinking of other ways to be successful, like socially successful. Like with your friends.
- Nick: Be kind to each other.
- J: Be kind to each other. Now are you saying that to me as an adult? That's the kind of answer that's wanted, 'be kind to each other'. But, really what do you have to do to be popular at school?
- Jay: Be nice.
- Alfie: Show off
- Nick: Be clever
- Jaden: Show off
- Finbar: Be good at football

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

Being good at football and sport was a highly desirable attribute and one very much admired by all of the boys. In this, the boys confirmed many of the findings of previous studies (Renolds, 2005, Swain, 2006). This was demonstrated in the focus groups when boys tended to answer in unison to questions about it and even in individual interviews, regardless of interest and participation, boys spoke of it as a skill highly valued by others.

J: Are you good at football?

Harry: I'm alright there

J: Is it good to be good at football?

All: Yes

J: Does everyone here play football?

All: Yes

*(Year 6, discussion group)*

J: Do you like football?

Alfie: Definitely

J: The last group told me that there's a group of people that are, like, football people

Toby: Yes

Jay: Definitely

Finbar: I went to a football club

Toby: He's got a nickname for football. Robbie Fowler

Nick: Robbie Fowler

J: What's the nickname for football?

Jay: That was his old name, old nickname

J: Are you very good at football?

Nick: No

Alfie: He's very good at fouling. That's why his nickname is foul-a-lot

J: Do you all play football?

All: Yes

J: Is it important to play football to have a lot of friends?

All: Yes

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

There were explicit comments made about the inclusion offered by playing football and its link to popularity amongst peers which was highlighted by Joel in his comments on how this can lead to some 'worry' amongst the older boys in Year 6. Whilst, his awareness that not all boys play and this should not (and does not) lead to their exclusion, his language portrays the reality that boys who play football are acknowledged as being 'better' than others. Here, the imposition of the order of particular constructions of masculinities which adhere to competitive physical

prowess is visible, with boys subordinating that which is contrary to the hegemonic.

J: The other thing I wanted to ask you about...You gave some interesting answers to me when I was asking about what makes you popular, or what makes you cool, and what makes you not so cool. And it was football. If you're good at football. Is that true, that most lads, if you're good at football, can get away with anything?

Joel: Most of the time, yes. It's like you've got to be, like...you've got to be able to listen to other people as well, but it's mainly football.

Everybody goes to...all the boys worry about football

J: But what if you're rubbish at football?

Joel: It depends really, because if you're rubbish at football but you're a really nice person, then people will get on with you. But if you're one of the people that you, like, kind of cut yourself off from, like, the better people, then people don't notice you as much

*(Year 6, interview)*

Even in very general conversation in the focus groups about friendships and popularity, the talk eventually moved to football and its role in creating and maintaining bonds with others. From the focus groups amongst younger boys, it

was apparent that skill at football and playing regularly with a group of peers afforded the opportunity to wield some power in the playground in dictating activity and thus confirm hegemonic status. There was also a link to establishing groups which then met outside of school which further strengthened bonds between them:

J: ...Yes, so it's important to you to get the feedback and get a grade and know where it is and that. Right. So that is success in subjects and learning. Are there other ways to be successful at school, like socially, like between your friends?

Ethan: You may not make a lot of friends. You may make friends from different classes

Ollie: Yes. I've got lots of friends from year 6

Dan: I've got a friend in year 6, Year 2, Year 1 and [overtalking]

Alfie: It's sort of like, communicating

Ethan: I've got friends from all over the school

Isaac: I've got some...like say, if you have a relative in school, like some of us do. Say you had a sister or a cousin or anything – you can, sort of, like play with them and meet their friends and they sort of...

J: Is there such as thing as being popular at school?

Alfie: No

Ethan: No, but I've...I think...

Lewis: You might be popular at football

Ethan: I think one person in our class is, kind of, popular and stuff

J: Yes? What kind of things do you have to do to be popular?

Alfie: Be good at things

Ollie: I'm not really bothered if you're not popular. It's just acting yourselves.  
You don't need to, sort of, push yourself and think, ooh, I want to be popular.

Dan: Sometimes people will like, like, Evan Smith, a lot of people, if he goes and plays football and everyone else is playing cricket, everyone else will go there and play football with him, so, like, a lot of people do that

J: Right. So does being good at football make you popular?

Alfie: Yes, a little bit

J: Is there a group of people that are very good at football?

Ethan: Yes

Ollie: There are some people, like out of school like play for Bucks United. Al  
them are my friends as well

Alfie: Some people just like to have, like, a little kick-about at school

Ollie: And outside school

Alfie: They just want to have a little game to play with

J: Are the two of you good at football?

Alfie: Yes

*(Year 5, discussion group)*



The advantages of being good at football are expressed by the excitement of Cole and his joy at being recognised, if only briefly, as 'being good' and the reward of being chosen for the team for a playground game. The link to the value of physical prowess is further reflected in Toby's determination to link his own sport to the same kind of kudos. The reward of the admiration that this attracts from peers is clear:

J:            So does it make a difference being clever? Do people look up to you if you're clever?

Ethan:      I don't know

Alfie:        Well, if you're good at things like I am...

Dan:        If you...like I showed that I'm good at football, didn't I? Remember the time when I was good at football?

All:        Yes

Dan:        Yes, and then Louis wanted me on his team and like...and then..

J:            So do people look up to you if you're good at football?

Dan:        Yes

Toby:       And at karate

*(Year 5, discussion group)*

Being good at football also appears to become increasingly important as the years progress and the boys seem to move away from indulging in play associated with

younger children, such as imaginative play and lack 'something to do' in the playground:

J:            So...the people that are not playing football in the playground at breaks, what do they do?

Joel:        They...well sometimes I don't play football. I play cricket or something.

J:            Right. What if they don't play any sport?

Joel:        They play chess, because sometimes Leo or somebody plays chess  
(Year 6, interview)

### **6.6.2 *Being cheeky and funny***

Another theme which emerged during discussion was the desirability of being funny or cheeky and rebellious; one that often emerges in the extant research dealing with adolescent boys and their 'laddish' behaviour within the secondary school context (Jackson, 2004, Jackson and Dempsey, 2009). This construction of masculinity appears to be emergent amongst the primary aged boys and there are links to expectations of behaviour as outlined above, where boys consider themselves to be not as 'well behaved' as girls. As such, this behaviour is largely associated by all of the boys as being a trait of masculinity and girls were

sometimes positioned as passively enjoying ‘the show.’ In all the years from 4 to 6, there appeared to be clear boundaries of what was considered to be acceptable behaviour but for some, the idea of appealing to peers rather than teachers was tempting. However, at this young age there was still a need to stay within the boundaries set by the authority of the teachers and the desire to perform well academically still superseded the need to perform for friends. This perhaps confirmed the idea of Bartholomaeus (2013) that age can set limitations on young boys and limit their access to hegemony as enacted through violence or rebellion. Nonetheless, ‘being funny’ especially in risqué banter with the teacher was clearly identified as a tool for winning friends as stated by both Harry and Jaden:

J:           What I was saying was, what other ways are there to be successful at school? I was thinking about how you manage to be popular at school and have lots of mates.

Harry:     Being funny

*(Year 6, interview)*

Jaden:     Everybody loves me for my comedy, don’t they?

Dan:       Yes

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

In portraying themselves as funny, it was clear that much of their reputations came from being 'cheeky' publicly, 'on the carpet,' and in interactions with the teacher which involved some degree of 'challenge' or witty riposte. Some teachers encouraged such 'banter' and there were unspoken boundaries as to how far this was allowed both from the point of view of engaging individual teachers or being seen as 'naughty' by peers. This was a delicate balancing act, to impress peers by showing 'personality' which distinguished them from others, without taking the behaviour beyond the limits of acceptability. The most popular boys achieved this by understanding the importance of context, focussing academically in the classroom setting and saving their 'naughty' behaviour for outside in the playground where it was expressed in other ways such as banter amongst friends (Coates, 1990) or acts of daring which tested the limits of the rules. Certainly, there was a correlation between being naughty and being funny.

From the interviews, however, there is the implicit suggestion that a highly desirable construction of masculinity does require some element of rebellion and to indulge in some 'messaging about.' In all the discussion of behavioural expectations, being cheeky and subsequent comments about labelling, there is an indication that having a public voice and not being too compliant is part of a more hegemonic construction of masculinity. This points to the fluid and complex gender identity process which is resonant with the idea of performativity in different contexts (Butler, 1990) so that the reflexive nature of contemporary life means that

the image of the rebellious and cheeky boy is shaped by a different discursive framework to the one who cares about SATs and his academic performance:

J: Ok. The other thing people were saying was that, as a lad in their class, to be popular, you should be a little bit funny or cheeky

Joel: Yes. You can't really get too naughty or people think, why have you done that?

J: Yes

Joel: Like, cheeky, a bit

J: A little bit cheeky. Is that the way to be popular with the teachers?

Joel: No. It's not the way to be popular with the teachers. Well, it depends though, because it depends what teacher. Like, if you've got a really strict teacher they, they don't like you all the time. But if you're a bit cheeky, like somebody...like Mrs Smith, she likes people that are a bit cheeky, got a bit of personality about them.

J: So how do you be popular with your mates and still keep the teachers on side?

Joel: Well, like, I don't really want to say this but like, me, Jack, Dominic, it's like the popular ones.

J: Yes?

Joel: But it's like we're cheeky outside, but inside we do our work kind of thing.

J: Right. So you still want to achieve academically, that's with all your subjects and everything..

Joel: Yes, but outside, you can mess around.

J: Right. Ok.

Joel: But inside, you can't.

*(Year 6, interview)*

Jon, who is also cited as being one of the more popular boys at school, also points to similar strategies in order to strike a balance between getting along with others and getting ahead, a process described by Hawley (2003) as almost Machiavellian:

J: Okay. Who will be the new David Beckham do you think?

Jon: Me

J: That's a good answer! You were saying that ...lads who are little bit cheeky or naughty or funny...that made you quite popular in the playground. Does that make you popular with the teachers?

Jon: No

J: How would you have to behave to be popular with the teachers?

Jon: Help out a lot, like, and then don't talk on the carpet unless you have to

- J: So how do you manage to do both, then? How do you manage to please the teacher and still be popular at the same time?
- Jon: You can probably be funny and, like joke outside, but then when you're in the classroom, be like, helping out and be quiet
- J: But does it...is it impressive when people are a little bit naughty in the class as well?
- Jon: Yes. Of course it's a little bit harder to juggle both things at once

*(Year 6, interview)*

### ***6.6.3 Academic ability and the delicate balancing act of achievement***

All of the boys showed a willingness to compete academically where their performance, or being 'good' at something, appeared to influence the perception of whether or not something was enjoyable. It was clear that being 'good' was a measurement established by being aware of how an individual was rated against peers. This was seen as early as Year 4 in the justification of choices when participants were asked to say which subject they considered to be their favourite:

- J: ...Can you tell me what your favourite subject is?
- Robbie: Mine is maths...because I'm just very good at it.

J: Right, ok. So you like maths, Ben, because you're good at it.

Robbie: Yes, and I enjoy it.

J: Jaden?

James: Literacy

J: Why?

James: Because you get to think of word and stories.

J: Right, ok. Finn?

Finn: Maths, because I'm just really good at it.

J: Cole?

Cole: Maths, geography and history. Maths, because I just like it, geography because I'm good at it, and history because I like learning about the war.

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

Alder et al. found in a study of adolescent boys that although those deemed to be very low achieving at school were rarely admired that to be seen as highly engaged academically also detracted from boys' popularity and carried a 'potentially degrading stigma' (1992:176); this appeared to such an extent that popular boys often downplayed their achievement. With regards to younger boys, other evidence from LaFontana and Cillessen (2002) suggests that prior to middle adolescence, however, that to be academically achieving does have some modest association with popularity. In contrast, this study reveals that there was a strong



correlation between achievement and popularity and that to be recognised by others as excelling was discussed in terms of making boys 'popular' or admired by other boys. All of the boys, without exception, expressed some degree of pride in relating stories where they had won the praise and recognition of their peers and this appeared to be a part of a hegemonic or desirable construction of masculinity:

J: If you're very clever, do people look up to you?

Alfie: Most of the time, because most of the time, in my homework, like, they'll like, wow.

Toby: Well, if you're good at things like I am...

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

J: Ok, are you looked up to if you're good at your school work?

Benji: Yes

Ben: Yes. It depends what sort of group you're in as well.

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

However, unlike with ability at football, there did appear to be boundaries and a careful balancing act of being noticed for achievement but without drawing the attention of others in a way that would result in accusations of 'boasting'. This is

discussed explicitly but also implied in Harry's reluctance to identify himself as good at literacy in the company of his peers:

J: What do you do then if you're really good. Really clever. Do you pretend not to be as clever so that you on with people better?

Seb: Don't boast about it

J: Right. So don't say that you're good. Can you boast about being good at football?

Seb: Yes

J: Can you take your shirt off and run round and do the plane? Is that ok to do?

Seb: Well you could but people would just look at you and laugh at you

Harry: It's alright to say when you've just scored or something like that, but that's not good like..well, like, just to go around skilling everybody

J: Are you very good at literacy?

Harry: [inaudible]

J: Yes? Would you say to people you're proud of being good at it?

Harry: Not really

J: No?

Harry: I don't....I'm not boasting. I don't like to boast

*(Year 6, group discussion)*

The balance between being seen to be achieving but yet being modest was also evident, to the extent that even amongst the younger boys in year 4, the unspoken rules were 'obvious'. It could be argued from the comments made that a strategy for the boys was to ensure that achievement in others was also acknowledged and praised. This idea also confirms Connell's (1997) notion that the different iterations of masculinity are complicit in creating the felicity conditions for the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. In the case of these findings, this was a construction which included the need to excel at school:

J: Is it important to you to do well at school? Like next year you'll do SATs. Do you want to do really well in your SATs?

Moses: I want to do really well, but I'm obviously not going to...Like if I get something really good, I'm not going to boast about it...

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: ...I wanted to ask you was, you know, that you were saying sort of being good at school is important to you and things like that?

Rob: Yes

J: Is it good to do well in SATs and things like that? Somebody said that some people, if they're too good at everything, some people might be

labelled a smarty pants?

Rob: Oh yes, I've heard that

J: Do you have people that are a bit of a smarty pants?

Rob: Yes. I'd...I would keep it a bit...I would not worry...Be fair to others and say: 'you're quite good at this as well' and 'I'm not as good at this'. If you say, 'I'm good at everything', then you're obviously going to be labelled a smarty pants

J: So is the best way to be a bit quiet about it?

Rob: Yes

*(Year 4, interview)*

The delicate balancing act between demonstrating the achievement required to win praise and admiration and the resultant backlash which might be drawn from being too boastful is highlighted by the negative labelling of boys who 'boast' or who lack modesty. This is an example of the 'boundary work' discussed by Martino (1999) based on Foucault's ideas of how social order is created through discourse (1978). Throughout the discussions and interviews there was very little mention of labelling except for the repeated mention of who was a 'smartypants'. Therefore, paradoxically, all the boys strived to be seen to be achieving and competing academically and wanted this to be noticed by their classmates but there was some public pretence that this was not the case. This led to the concept of being 'too good', a nebulous boundary that none of the boys appeared to be able to

quantify and seemed to be achievement without the social skills necessary to not make others feel 'less'. Thus, whilst there was little evidence to support the idea that boys were marginalised for academic success as found by Martin and Pallotta-Chiarolli's study (2003), the regime of normalising practices (Foucault, 1978) instead focussed on how achievement was represented. For others however, such as Alfie, there was a more rebellious response to any attempt at 'policing' by other boys:

- J:           What if you're good at all the subjects, if you're really, really good at everything?
- Toby:       Then you'd be the most popular in the class
- Finbar:     Yes, but some people might be coming up to you and saying 'smarty-pants, smarty pants', you're...you know everything.
- Toby:       Yes, that's what Leon says to me.
- J:           This is something that I've heard before, that if you're too good at everything, people might call you a smarty pants or something
- Finbar:     Leon calls everyone a smarty pants
- J:           So if you got to be...what do you do then? If you're very clever, do you pretend not to be too clever then?
- All:        Yes
- Alfie:       I pretend I'm more clever
- J:           Do you? Are you just clever and proud?

Alfie        Yes. I can do a stem and leaf diagram and now, so. I'm like...

J:            When you say how clever you are, does it bother other people?

Jay:        Yes, you say you're really clever and then someone else says, 'no, you're not'.

All:        Yes

Alfie:        And then you're like, 'yes I am'. 'You can't do this' and 'I can do that', and then you have an argument.

Jay:        And a massive fight, and then you end up getting told off.

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

The engagement with ideas of progression, achievement or competition was explicitly discussed by the boys in relation to all of the activities they undertook both inside and outside the classroom. The value of this was never challenged and thus, as posited by Foucault (1978,1981) their discourse both structured and maintained the way they perceived reality; a reality in which the value of competition was internalised and provided a central focus point. The tension therefore, for many of the boys, was not to challenge the need to excel but to consider the range of possibilities in demonstrating this and to achieve whilst not making others jealous to the extent that it would draw negative comments. At the heart of trying to maintain this balance was not always self- centred concern but often it demonstrated a care and consideration of others in trying to recognise them as 'being good' at something and particularly during the focus groups, boys

would point out the success of others. Whilst the boys appeared to be in constant competition, as shown above in their need to defend their status so vigorously, there was still a sense of supporting each other and also a strong sense of 'fair play' at how success should be achieved:

J:            So, I'm going to ask you, what do you think it means to be successful at school?

Jonny:      Determination

Thomas:    Hard work

J:            Hard work, yes? So you're thinking of the work itself. Do you think it's important to be successful at school?

Thomas:    Yes

J:            If you were going to leave school, which I mean, you are next week, in what ways would you think, oh, I've been successful at school?

Jon:         Well I think I've done well in maths, but in English...

J:            Not so sure? Do high grades mean that you are successful?

Jon:         Yes

Joel:        Not necessarily [overtalking]

J:            Are there other ways to be successful at school

Joel:        Yes, because we could be successful in..because you don't really do, like, lessons in sport on paper. It's more like acted. So it's like..or you come from a family where you do something

J: Right, when I was saying what other ways to be successful at school I was also thinking how do you manage to be, like, popular at school and have lots of mates?

Chris: Being good at something mainly because if you're good at something and everybody goes, 'wow, you're really good at that'.

J Ok. Good at what? What's the best thing to be good at?

Chris: There's loads of things...

Joel: Sport

Harry: Sometimes my guitar

J: Yes, guitar? Music..what about literacy then? If you were really, really good at English, would people think you were cool?

Harry: I'm not sure

Joel: It depends which way you want to look at it

J: Ok, which is a good way to look at it?

Joel: A good way to look at it is to see how somebody gets good at it or something. A good kind of test, so you've got a good result. They'll go 'wow, you're good at that'. But then in other ways some people think you're kind of like a duff or something.

J: Right, so sometimes if you're good at different subjects do you, like, get labels, like the Year 4s are saying to me that if you're really good at everything, people could label you like a bit of a smarty pants or...

All: Yes

Jon: If you're really good at everything you get...because in the SATs



they've got all the files

J: Yes? So what do you do then if you're really, really good at your....if you're really clever, What do you have to do? Do you pretend not to be as clever so that you get on with people better?

Jon: Don't boast about it

*(Year 6, group discussion)*

#### **6.6.4 Gaming and games**

One of the activities outside of academic achievement and sport, which offered the boys the chance to show their prowess was that of gaming. This offered a similar function to football in that it also allowed for contact outside of school so that bonds and friendships could be strengthened through a shared passion. It was also discussed as desirable as being competitive and offering the chance to be part of a team. The theme of progression and admiration of those who excel, however, was also found in the discussion of gaming as it was with every other activity which was participated in by the boys. Unlike Connolly's study of South Asian boys (1996) and Renold's investigation in primary school (2001), the peer group solidarity created by the shared interest of gaming was not incompatible with the footballing culture and there was some cross over in participation. Whilst, as posited by Connell, the development of 'alternative masculinities' with alternative interests did serve in some cases to avoid dominant football practices,

boys who excelled at gaming were far from marginalised and the skills required were largely admired:

J: Right, if you can think of people who are popular and people that, you know, other people want to hang around with. What kind of things make you want to hang around with somebody else?

Robbie: They're smart, good at games. To think that I even know some!... sort of games and Nintendos and Xbox

Lewis: Yes

Robbie: I love people who just know a lot about that

J: Okay

Robbie: ..like Taylor, Ashley, Ben because they just know a lot about the gaming world

J: So not necessarily football but gaming and games is...

Alfie: It's like most of us in the class have got this game called Clash of the Clans

Lewis: Yes, I love that

Alfie: And, like, we're all in the same sort of team. Like, it's like, you can attack different bases and on the weekend [inaudible] and your friends aren't at your house you can talk to them on the chat room

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

### **6.6.5 Money and the display of wealth**

The need to be seen to achieve but yet not appear boastful was a key theme in how the boys viewed appropriate behaviour and this was keenly policed amongst themselves using a range of strategies which included attaching negative labels to those who did not observe the rules. The need to behave 'appropriately' in terms of boasting was also extended to money and material wealth. It is noteworthy that the response to 'showing off' expensive items was actually more of an infringement than boasting about achievement and the backlash apparently harsher. The nonchalance expressed by Will that 'money doesn't matter' only appears true whilst most of the children appear to have the same. The comment that 'nobody knows how much money [others] have got' also implies that, like achievement, it is not seemly to display. However, despite Will's comments about the need to be a 'good, nice' person many of the boys, throughout the interviews, linked their performance at school to having money in the future and this seemed an end goal in achieving exams. For the boys, wealth and status are clearly linked and this is apparent in the anecdotes about money, its role in popularity and the jealousy which it seems to arouse:

J:           Right. Ok. I get it. Are there other things that make you popular? I'm thinking if perhaps you've got more money?

Joel: No, not really

J: Not bothered about much money somebody's got or...

Joel: No. Because nobody in our class really knows about how much money they've got.

J: What if somebody did boast about how much money they'd got?

Joel: You're not going to be popular because everybody thinks you're a rich kid.

J: You don't want to have too much money? But, when you look at people that, you know, lads today would like to be, like celebrities, it seems to be mainly footballers. Is it just the football or is it the money and the life and .....

Joel: It's kind of the personality of them. Like you have Ronaldo, say is one of the best players in the world and he's a good, nice person. He's good to his football club. He's just a nice person

*(Year 6, interview)*

J: If someone was to be cool and I'm talking at school, not, like, outside school, what would you need to make you more popular, ok, or more liked by other people? First of all thinking about the kind of clothes you would wear.

Lewis: Smart uniform

J: Would you just have smart uniform or would you try to make it a little bit different or would you have branded stuff?

Lewis: Try to make is a bit different *and* wear branded stuff

J: Ok. If you have branded stuff, can you tell me what brand it is that you would....

Alfie C: Like, some people think what would be really cool....they would wear junky stuff like Super Jive jeans, like, all the new stuff that came out so I could show off. Not really show off because it's good to have a lot of money, like, but you should wear them...

J: So you don't want to show off too much?

Alfie C: No

Edward: Like some people, they'll come in with new football boots or something and show everyone because, you know, they were trying to show something. Like Jemma Hill. She came in with new football boots the other day.

Lewis: And was, like, showing off a little bit

Edward: Yes, and some of the people were saying, 'very nice' but some people t were, like, oh no, they're horrible. No.

J: Yes?

Edward: You can get much nicer ones than them!

Alfie C: It was like...

Lewis : It's good to, like... [overtalking]

Edward: And it was Ben, he brought his new shoes and some people were like,

‘no, they’re horrible’

Robbie: They’re well nice them

Matthew: I thought they were nice

Alfie C: When I brought a scooter in which is worth £200, Michael says, like, ‘you’re spoiled’ and stuff because I brought a scooter in

Nick: I know. Yes. He kept saying, ‘oh your father spoils you and all your brothers’.. [overtalking]

Alfie C: Because my Dad’s got a bike [overtalking]

Nick: He’s really jealous because he hasn’t got...what he’ll do is, like [overtalking]

Matthew: You don’t want to put it under people’s noses in case they get a bit, like...

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

#### **6.6.6 The power of popularity**

Throughout the conversations it became clear that a desirable construct of masculinity was that of a boy who achieved in the classroom academically as well as outside on the pitch but who somehow managed to combine this with requisite social skills such as ‘playing fair’ and acknowledging the achievements of others. The key defining theme was that achievement needed to be noticed by others

rather than flagrantly identified by the person themselves. This delicate balancing act appeared to be fraught with complexities and to misjudge the boundaries which were rigorously policed by peers, appeared to result in a backlash which ranged from labelling, to arguing to physical fights. There was some evidence, particularly from Alfie where these boundaries were rejected and he was prepared to resist these 'rules' by deliberately making a point of breaching them, 'it just makes me boast more'. However, for boys such as Joel who best exemplify the social skills required to achieve popularity, there was an awareness of the resulting power and status and also some thought had been given to his concerns of how this would be maintained moving on to high school:

J: Do you work hard?

Joel: I would say I do work quite hard

J: Do you try to make out to other people that you're finding the work easy or you don't work hard?

Joel: It depends what it is. Because, like, sometimes I like to tell my teachers I find it easy, because they set me some kind of challenge. But sometimes, if it's, like, easy in front of my friends and they're finding it hard, I just won't say anything.

J: Ok

Joel: But I'll help them along, kind of thing, if they need it.

J: That's quite nice actually. What about other people who boast, who

just say all the time that they are good at things?

Joel: You think they're a bit of a know it all

J: Yes. You mentioned some labels. I've heard some. I've heard 'smarty pants' and I've heard 'know it all'. Do you have people who are 'geeks' or do you use that kind of label as well, or not really?

Joel: Yes. I was thinking of what we call it again...

J: Nerd?

Joel: No, we have phrases, like...ST...GTS

J: What's that?

Joel: It's 'goody two shoes'

J Okay. I get it, yes. Is that somebody that's a bit too much of a suck up to the teacher and...

Joel: Yes

J: Too good at the....

Joel: Yes

J: So you don't want to be like that?

Joel: And the better people, they won't help you. And some of the better people. Like I will help somebody in maths or something. But, like, say some other people in the class, who do know a bit more. If you're not their friend, like your kind of best friend, they'll let you figure it out yourself or something

J: So, that's not so nice. Do you have other labels as well? Do you have chavs, or....



Joel: Yes. Sometimes Alex is a bit of a chav because he wears his trousers down baggy

J: Are the chavs good at schoolwork?

Joel: I don't really like to say anything, because some chavs are clever. Because you can't just judge them by the way they look.

J: Right. Ok. But are chavs clever?

Joel: Most of them, no

J: Do people look up to chavvy sort of people?

Joel: They do and they don't. Because Alex hangs out with, like, me, Jack and Dom so people look up to him in that way. But when he's by himself, like, if we weren't hanging out with him, and stuff like that, he wouldn't be as popular as he is.

J: So are you popular by hanging out with popular people as well?

Joel: Yes

J: Could you adopt somebody and make them popular?

Joel: Yes. Well, it's like my friend was saying a couple of days ago...well my other..well, not my best friend, but a friend called Daniel....he started to hang out with us. And his friends were just my friends I knew in the class. They kept saying to me, Will, is Daniel being a bit....thinking he's dead cool now he's hanging out with you? And I went, 'yeah, why'? And then he kept..he's hanging out with us. But then his friends aren't happy with him because they think he's all cool hanging out with us.

J: But if you're popular then, do you have more power?

Joel: Yes

J: Now that you are popular in the class and you've got that power, do you think you'll take that with you to the High School?

Joel: No. Because you've got a lot of other....there will be a lot of people.... well, I know that I'll have most of my family there. And I know a lot of people will know me, but then in other ways, there's a lot of people that don't know me, and they might think I'm cocky or....

J: So do you think you'll try and be quieter about what you're good at and things like that until you know....

Joel: Yes, until you know where you are.

J: But when you get to High School, do you still want to do well?

Joel: Yes I still want to....see at the High School, I think I might sort of knuckle down a bit harder than at Primary

J: What if you get to the High School and they don't like people who are cocky and they don't like people who are good at their subjects? Would you pretend not to be good at your subjects or would you be a bit quieter about it?

Joel: I'd probably be quieter about it, but, say I was good at something, I wouldn't like, boast to the teacher or anything. I'd wait until they say something to me

*(Year 6, interview)*

## 6.7 Summary

This chapter details the sense of identity the participants have as young boys. The findings show that, as boys, they hold a binary view of their gender as being 'other' than girls and as such, they have developed a community of practice which necessitates rejecting what are constructed as 'feminine' interests such as 'makeup' and 'dancing'. This 'dual culture' appears less defined in younger years but appears to become more developed as the school years progress, as expressed in language such as 'girly' and 'tomboy' which point to the gender appropriate behaviour required. Beyond this, there is an acceptance that there are different types of boy and not all boys adhere to a 'boy code' which appears to demand a certain level of toughness and physical prowess.

Unlike some studies (Martino, 2000, Alloway, 1997) the conversations with the boys show that whilst the expectations of behaviour in their eyes appears to be different for girls and boys at school, there is not a complete acceptance of those who are non-compliant in terms of academic achievement and classroom appropriate behaviour. On the contrary, there appear to be narrow boundaries for acceptable conduct in which it is not desirable to either be too naughty or boastful which is rigorously policed by peers. What emerges is a complex picture of masculinity which is, at times, traditional and hegemonic in nature whilst at other times indicative of a more fluid identity which reflects the erosion of expected

gender roles. The findings also highlight the delicate balancing act which is required to achieve at school and to be popular in terms of enacting a desirable construction of masculinity within the school context. The next chapter draws these findings and those from chapter 5 together in order to consider whether the construction of masculinity impacts upon whether how boys view and engage with the study of literacy.

## **Chapter 7: What gender performances and subjectivities intersect with the acceptance or rejection of the study of literacy?**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The previous two chapters explored how boys construct their identity within the primary school context. Arising from these findings, it is possible to trace some of the ways in which they manage and negotiate their identities and the influence that is brought to bear by the awareness that some constructions may be more desirable than others. This is seen in both the acceptance or rejection of such ideals. The pressure exerted by the boys in policing behaviour is also evident. Although there is an acceptance that there are 'different kinds of boy', these are still often constructed around the binary concept of being 'other' to that of female and this appears to result in different communities of practice where boys develop some interests based on gender and reject others which are perceived to be 'girly', a phenomena which becomes more entrenched moving through the years.

This chapter will concentrate on drawing together the findings of the previous two chapters to explore whether the gender performances and subjectivities of the boys intersect with their perception of the study of literacy. It will argue in the first instance that the competitive environment at school results in boys valuing

academic success and literacy as a part of this. It also demonstrates that literacy is studied in a variety of ways and so that some components, if not all, are spoken of as enjoyable by the majority of boys. However, after exploring how boys talk about the different activities required in the study of literacy, this chapter also presents an argument that the same competitive environment which is successful in engaging boys academically, may also be the start of a process where boys who eventually realise that they cannot compete begin to turn to other strategies of self worth in order to gain status amongst their peers.

## **7.2 Are some subjects better for girls or boys?**

It is evident from the data in this study that amongst the boys in the younger years there is a culture of equality in terms of activities and academic subjects, as demonstrated by Robbie in year 4:

J: I'm going to ask you another question. There might be no answer to it, but do you think some subjects are better for girls than for boys?

Robbie: No, no I don't. I think some people like things, some people don't. Some girls like the same as boys, some boys |

the same as girls

J: Right, so it's pretty much equal?

Robbie: Yes. Girls are the same as boys. It's just like...they're no different

*(Year 4, interview)*

The idea that there are no subjects better for girls or boys is one that is expressed by nearly all of the boys, except two, who identify maths as being a subject which is better for the girls and one who identifies literacy. In year 4 and early year 5 this view also extends to activities such as football and other sports, as seen in chapter 6. However, moving through year 5, and particularly by the end of year 6, whilst the view of equality with regards to study remains, there is a perceptible shift as boys identify themselves as being 'other' to girls and phrases such as 'girly' and 'tomboy' start to appear to exemplify the differences in gender based interests – specifically being interested in football or makeup. The majority of boys also begin to talk of themselves as living a different experience to that of girls and can readily point out differences between the two communities of practice in terms of how they are expected to behave or how they respond to arguments. As the desirability of demonstrating physical prowess and toughness begins to take shape, the boys appear to distance themselves from girls and activities which are perceived as feminine. However, at Primary school level, this schism appears to affect

activities, interests and friendships in the playground more than it impacts on subjectivities surrounding different areas of study such as literacy.

### **7.3 I like what I'm good at**

Perhaps the greatest influence on the perception of the study of literacy stems from the pervasive culture of competition and the idealisation of the concept of progress and measurable achievement as seen in the comments below by Ethan, Finbar and Cole. Unsurprisingly, boys rate their enjoyment of subjects with how good they are, as measured against their peers. However, a gender divide is apparent in this; as the boys move through the years and the communities of practice become more distinct, the boys appear to recognise their achievements amongst their peers rather than including the girls. It could also be argued that the intrinsic values displayed are gendered, as boys are increasingly positioned as being required to compete both in and out of the classroom as the school years progress.

J: ...can you tell me what your favourite subject is?

Ethan: Mine is maths as well, because I'm just very good at it

J: So you like maths, Ben, because you're good at it?



Ethan: Yes, and I enjoy it

J: ...Right, okay, Finbar?

Finbar: Maths, because I'm really good at it

J: Everybody's really good at maths! Cole, what do you like?

Jay: Maths, geography and history. Maths because I just like it, geography because I'm just good at it, and history because I like learning about the war

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

A further factor in enjoying what they perceive themselves to excel at is the confidence that this engenders as well as the admiration of peers. The culture of celebration of achievement is seen in the exclamatory support offered by Michael and this was a common theme throughout all of the focus groups where boys were often keen to publicly acknowledge the success of others so that they, in turn, would be similarly feted. The kudos gained by being seen to be successful at any subject was linked to the prestige of achievement rather than the nature of the subject itself.

J: Can I ask you, last year, did you enjoy literacy?

Jake: Yes, I was really good at it, but I....

Michael: Yes, and you won!

J:            You enjoyed it because you felt you were good at it?

Jake:        I was good at it...

Michael:    You had confidence

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

This attitude is also exemplified in subjective comments made about personal preferences in not liking different elements of the curriculum. These also seem to be specifically linked to a lack of achievement and, in the some cases, not being offered the help required to progress:

J:            Why don't you like it?

Moses:     I feel like, sometimes the activities, and sometimes, I just don't like writing and I just get confused

Ben:        I don't like science. Sometimes you have to do [inaudible] something and I'm not very good at stuff, I find it a bit boring

Moses:     I don't like French...because she doesn't speak to you or speaks to you in French....

Mich:       ...mainly because when you ask her something and she just sits in her chair, and she doesn't..she looks away. She goes like that, like 'go away..I don't want you here...go back to your work'

J:            Does she say that in French?

Mich: That's like, the only thing she doesn't say in French!

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

There was also evidence to suggest that the measuring of oneself against others could have a negative impact on study as shown in Moses' comments on his insecurities about the speed of his work in comparison with others. Here, the competitive element to 'finishing first' outweighs any consideration of the quality of what is being produced. Furthermore, he does appear to enjoy work when not surrounded by classmates so that the anxiety of being compared is removed:

Moses: Sometimes it's the writing and sometimes it's the thinking....because sometimes we have to copy something out which I think is too easy, but everyone else thinks it's easy as well...but my hand moves slower because I'm used to doing more detail, but then I start wishing and it feels like I'm under pressure

Moses: In a classroom environment, I sort of, like, don't feel I worked my best, but if I'm at home, I'm in my room, I feel like, ok, I can do this

*(Year 5, interview)*

## **7.4 The different components of literacy**

A theme which was frequently reiterated during discussions of literacy was the diversity of activities required which included learning phonics, sentence construction, creative writing, reading and the study of poetry. All of these were readily identified by the boys and so, often, the response to literacy moved from general liking/not liking to the parsing and appraising of its different components.

### ***7.4.1 It's not like anything in the real world***

As seen in chapters 6 and 7, one of the emergent themes was the link between specific purpose and study, particularly the need to understand the motivation to do something whether that be linked to wider concerns of a job later in life or the need to progress in a subject for the SATs. The re-introduction of phonics in the

later years to comply with new curriculum policy was, therefore, confusing to some and appeared to be the most actively contested part of learning literacy. There was a distinct disconnect between reading as an enjoyable activity and the learning of phonics. Furthermore, the confusion caused by the need to reintroduce phonics left some boys with a more negative view of literacy as they no longer felt as able in the subject:

Jake: It depends on what sort of things we did. If we did descriptions about Harry Potter, which I enjoyed. But we also did bits that I didn't enjoy....like phonic sounds

Michael: Sometimes, because like....sometimes it's quite hard, because she brings up cards that just say, 'oi' or a new split diagraph. Sometimes it's hard. I just don't know how to pronounce it

Jake: And then she brings up the card 'Y' and you say, like, 'Y' and she's like, 'no'. Even though it just says 'Y' on the card

Sam: Or, you're just supposed to shout it, like, 'E' but we don't really learn, because we don't have...teachers always say 'sing this little tune' and the tune actually helped me to remember some things but ....just saying 'oi', 'eh'....

J: It's not related to anything in the real world? It's just like a random sound?

Sam: And they say 'think of something that it's used in' but sometimes,

you think, like, 'O', 'U'...what the hell is that being used in?

Then you don't know. Then there's no sound

J: Has the phonics made you feel that you don't understand literacy as well as you did?

Sam: Yes. Like, when we do phonics, she hangs them up and, like, so much of that....because we've only just started doing phonics year and when we did some in reception year, we never really concentrated as much

Ben: We're, like, in shock

Sam: We're, like..'what does that sound mean again'? and we're just confused

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

J: ...Have a think...what do you really not like doing?

Jake: Phonics

J: Why don't you like phonics?

Jake: It's boring

Moses: English

J: You don't like English? Why?

Moses: Especially reading phonics

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

#### ***7.4.2 I don't like writing but I love writing stories***

A further emergent issue with literacy was the dislike of writing. On exploring this, there was often a clear distinction made between having to think of ideas versus the physical act of writing itself which was widely spoken of as a laborious chore. There were several common reasons given for the rejecting of handwriting including the length of time it took and having to complete work when others who had finished could play outside, an idea which could be linked to the gendered culture of preferring activity and perhaps an indicator of a nascent view of literacy as being a passive. Often, it was cited as just 'making your hand ache'. This was compared unfavourably to maths which involved less writing and shorter tasks and highlighted an issue where maths and literacy, being the two core requirements of learning, were often seen in binary opposition leading to one often being measured against the other rather than with other subjects. Particularly toward the end of year 6, boys were defining themselves as being more of an 'English' or 'maths' person. Here, the discussion of the boys shows the paradox between disliking the act of 'writing' but enjoying 'writing stories':

Nick: I think we do a bit too much of literacy..

Alfie: Yes, because we do it every single day

Robbie: Yes, I reckon we could do a bit more maths

- Alfie: ...maths we can do a bit more because we do it until break in the morning [with literacy] sometimes, like, you go, 'oh my hand is really hurting' because you're writing too much or, say, if you're finishing a story, you're sort of in a rush to get out to play because everyone likes to play
- J: So hands up who likes literacy
- Alfie: Yes, I like literacy but you just don't want to do it as much
- J: Right, ok....so you feel like you do it too much. What is your favourite bit of literacy?
- Edward: Writing stories
- Robbie: Yes, writing stories
- Matthew: Writing stories
- Lewis: Say, if it's a story..if it was..say, if a little kid likes pirates and y did the story about that, then it would be, like, sort of enjoying it because it's your sort of subject that you like so you can learn about more of that...
- Nick: It's fantasy. Fantasy. I like fantasy as well

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

Nick's comments about 'fantasy', demonstrate a commonly mentioned genre in both reading and writing and there were some connections made between this and the gaming culture which was prevalent amongst the boys. For those who



considered themselves to be 'gamers', a level of desirability was conferred on activities which were connected with 'fantasy' or 'adventure' and the teachers had capitalised on this by focusing writing tasks on books which had been made into films and games such as 'the Hobbit' and 'Harry Potter'. This meant that for most of the boys the subject matter of writing was talked of very positively in direct contrast with actually having to put pen to paper.

The distinction between the act of writing versus the enjoyment of literacy is also seen in the group discussion of boys in year 5 and the types of activities they enjoy:

J:           What kind of activities are there that you do, which make maths your favourite?

Jake:       Yes, it's really challenging

J:           It's challenging. What kind of things do you do, then? What kind of activities?

Jake:       Sometimes we do times tables, and algebra and all sorts

Michael:   With maths we usually do about everything. We do times, points, decimals..

J:           Why do you like it though? Is it because the tasks are long, short, you're writing, you're on the computer? What are the ways you learn?

Jake: I like it because we don't have to do, like, lots of writing because I don't like my writing

J: Ok, so it's fairly short. Why do you like it?

Sam: Well, we do fun stuff, like, say if I have 24 chips and we share them out to each player, how much would I have when we played?

J: So, it's more like a game?

Ben ..I like maths because we get to do...it's like, we do this thing called 'murder mysteries' and you have to, like, work out stuff to find clues and then when you've found all the clues, you find who the murderer is

Jake: Yes, there's a list of people

Michael: I like art, because, like, you don't have to do, you don't have to write anything that much. But you can use, like pictures and things. The teacher picks what we have to draw, but we hand draw in our way most of the time

J: So you like games, you like choice, you don't like writing?

Michael: No

J: Literacy then. Do you like literacy as well?

Ben: Yes

Lewis: Yes

Moses: Yes. I [inaudible]

Jake: I don't really like literacy, but I'm not....I don't like it, at the

same time...

J: What don't you like about it?

Jake: Writing. Well, I like *what* we write at the same time

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

J: [Do you like] literacy?

Moses: No, I don't like it

J: Why don't you like literacy? What kind of activity is in it that you don't like?

Moses: I just..I'm just not that keen on writing. I just love the things we do

*(Year 5, interview)*

Sam, also from year 5 outlines the challenge that writing can pose and Robbie, who takes an active delight in literacy, still expresses a preference to work on the computer rather than write by hand:

Sam T: I don't like [literacy] as much

J: What are the kind of things you don't like about it?

Sam T: All the writing

J: Do you like imaginative writing where you have to think of your ideas?

Sam T: Not really, no. Usually we have to fill in sheets and then we have to write it up in our books

J: Do you not like the handwriting bit of it or is it...

Sam T: Hmm...just the writing bit

J: But you have to write in maths. Is it different?

Sam T: Yes, it's kind of different because you don't exactly concentrate on the shape you make, because numbers are easier to write down. Better

*(Year 5, interview)*

J: Do you prefer to do writing or work on the computer?

Robbie: I prefer to work on the computer

*(Year 4, interview)*

The distinction made by the boys between 'writing' and '*writing*' is best exemplified by Chris who clearly has two very different ideas about the physical act versus storytelling so that his response seems almost nonsensical unless the distinction he is making is understood:

J: ...why do you like [literacy as] your favourite subject?

Chris: Because it's just nice to write sometimes

J: What kind of writing? Do you like imaginative writing where you write yourself...

Chris: No, I don't like writing

J: What's your favourite bit of literacy?

Chris: Writing stories

J: Ok, what kind of stories? Imaginative stories

Chris: Adventure

*(Year 6, interview)*

#### **7.4.3 *I just don't have any ideas***

Where writing was talked of as a negative experience as both a physical act and as an activity, the difficulty of 'thinking of ideas' was usually cited as the reason. Hence, there was a divide between boys who felt comfortable with generating ideas for stories and those who found it difficult. Again, there was a strong correlation between the perception of personal achievement and being able. Some boys found the process of 'thinking' to be enjoyable whereas others found it difficult and struggled with focus. For those who found the requisite concentration

required for thinking overwhelming, this aspect of literacy was deemed to be passive and dull. In particular, there was a correlation between 'thinking' and 'doing nothing'. For others it was exciting and their imagination was something tangible, a tool which could be used:

J: Jaden...[what is your favourite]?

Jaden: Literacy

J: Literacy, why?

Ben: Because you get to think of words and think of stories

*(Year 4, discussion group)*

J: ...okay and what about literacy. What are your favourite activities to do in literacy?

Robbie: I quite like writing stories

J: Why do you like writing stories

Robbie: Just because you get to...get your imagination out a little bit

J: Have you got a good imagination?

Robbie: Yes

*(Year 4, interview)*

There was a divide between those who felt actively able to participate in the thinking process required for storytelling and others who were more puzzled by the process and equated it with not really doing anything. For James, 'starting' is the act of doing an activity such as writing which is perhaps more active than planning:

J: Harry. Literacy?

Harry: Not really?

J: Not really? What don't you like about it?

Harry: I don't like...it's just when I sit down and stuff like writing something from scratch. I don't like doing that

J: Is it getting the ideas the bit that you don't like or the actual writing?

Harry: Yes, the ideas

J: James, what do you not like about it?

Seb: Literacy...like ideas. I just want to get started with the story, not to think....take forever doing ideas and stuff. I just want to start it

J: Oliver?, do you not like....

Oliver I can't, like, think of, like, starting [inaudible]

J: Do you get lots of help with that though, trying to think of ideas?

Leo: Sometimes

Oliver: Quite a bit of help

Seb: Sometimes it's boring because you've got to write about this, when you just want to start it. You've got to do it

J: So some other subjects, like, say, maths. Are they easier because you don't have to think of ideas?

Seb: Yes

Harry: You just get a text book or something and you have to do that

*(Year 6, group discussion)*

It is noteworthy that all of the boys in this group from year 6, are also part of the 'footballing' group and adhere to the more popular construct of masculinity which demands physical prowess and involvement in sport. However, most of the boys in this group also consider themselves to be academic achievers and despite Seb's' impatience with the 'thinking' aspect of literacy he does comment that this is his favourite subject at school unlike the others in his friendship group who all prefer PE. With regards to the construction of masculinity, there does, in the interviews, appear to be a correlation between expressing an impatience with passive activities and the boys who favour sport. However, this often seems to be superseded by the desire to achieve, resulting in a paradoxical effect of a reluctance to sit and concentrate for long periods alongside a highly competitive



nature and the desire to excel at all activities at school. The defining factor in motivation and willingness to do tasks which are less desirable, such as writing, therefore appears to bear some relationship to whether the boy feels able and confident enough to actually achieve. Hence, boys who were involved in the footballing culture but were also confident in their ability in literacy were more likely to talk of persevering through literacy tasks such as writing as a necessary evil to achieve the end result of a good grade in the SATs or simply just to be perceived as good at it by their peers.

The writing of stories in all years was seen as a core component of literacy by the boys and one on which a great deal of time was spent. Therefore, the ability to generate ideas independently was a defining factor as to whether the subject was enjoyed, perhaps even more than an engagement with reading. Certainly, the feeling of not being able to think of ideas often led to preferring other subjects:

Bart: I don't really like literacy because I'm not that good at making stories up which is the reason I think I really like to add up

*(Year 4, interview)*

J: Ethan and Alifie, you don't particularly like literacy because you...you haven't got the ideas?

Alfie C: Yes

Ethan: Yes

J: Is maths easier because you don't have to think of your own ideas?

Ethan: Yes, because you get sheets

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

J: ...what about your least favourite subject?

Adam: ...probably literacy because I struggle to get ideas in my head

*(Year 5, group discussion)*

J: Right okay. So imaginative things. Seb?

Seb: Probably...probably literacy again, because it's really hard to think when you have, like, in everybody in the room

*(Year 6, interview)*

#### **7.4.4 Reading**

Reading was an activity which was spoken of as enjoyable by the majority of boys although there was a mixed response in terms of those who read outside of school. As suggested by Rogoff (1995) and Alloway (2010), children do not always appropriate the learning behaviours which are encouraged by adults and thus, although many of the boys had parents who read to them and enjoyed reading themselves, this did not always result in a son who did likewise. It is interesting to note that of the boys who spoke of having parents who read, it was mostly mothers who were seen to do this in their leisure time which could consolidate the idea of reading as a feminised activity.

Michael: Well, it's a...it's a thing that we do. Like, we do different books. 'You Can Speak to Animals'. Here's a mammal, ok, you try to find out where he has it. We've had 'Children of Winter' and they're really fun books..

J: Do you like reading?

Michael: Yes

J: Do you read at home?

Michael: Yes

J: Just for yourself, for pleasure?

Michael: Sometimes with my mum and dad..or my dad..or sometimes  
on my own

*(Year 4, interview)*

J: What about the reading bit of literacy?

Chris Not really

J: No? Are you made to read books?

Chris: Not really, no

J: No? Do you read at home?

Chris: Not a lot, no

J: Do your parents read? Do they enjoy reading?

Chris: Yes

J: Yes? But you don't enjoy reading?

Chris: No

J: I'm presuming you read at home [Joel] because you like  
literacy

Joel: Yes

J: What kind of books do you read?

Joel: The Hobbit

J: Fantasy kind of books. Do you like gaming as well? Those  
types of games that are fantasy games?

Joel: Sometimes. It depends what game

J: Do your parents read?

Joel: Yes, quite a bit

J: Both your mum and your dad?

Joel: Well, my mum reads a lot more than my dad does

Harry: It's not my favourite. I don't read much at home and my parents like reading

J: Have your parents tried to make you read at home?

Harry: No

Seb: Reading is one of my favourites

J: What kind of books do you read?

Seb: Adventure

J: I'm reckoning you don't like reading at all [Josh]

Josh: No. I *would* read a book. If I can read a book, it's got to be something that....because there's some books I just like to read to half way through

J: Can you think of any books that you really enjoyed?

Josh: I like stuff like Captain Underpants..like funny...like comics...

J: Would you read as a hobby?

Josh: I wouldn't read like a hobby. I'd read, like, now and again, but I wouldn't read every day

J: So, when you've got to read at school, you know, you've got to pick up a book...would you rather have a story book or

would you rather have a fact book?

Josh: A story book

J: How about you Leo?

Leo: A story book

J: Do you read a home?

Leo: I do sometimes

J: Do you do reading with your mum or dad?...have you still go to do that or are you too old for that now?

Leo: No, my mum tells me to read and then my mum and dad... well, my dad *would* read, but my mum *likes* reading. She's always got a book

*(Year 6, group discussion)*

For many boys, reading was spoken of as multi contextual and occurring in a number of different ways. Many of the reading activities both at home and at school involved being read to, or in pairs, small groups or as a whole class and this sharing of literature was referenced as a positive experience. The school also did many 'topic based' activities so that books were used as a springboard to learn other subjects such as maths and science (calculating the size of the Hobbit hole, murder mystery science). This appeared to give a wider value to reading and all of the boys spoke positively of storytelling and the resulting activities. As with the writing tasks, many boys cited favourite genres such as 'fantasy' and 'adventure'

and very few boys preferred reading fact rather than fiction. However, it is also necessary to note that whilst the boys commonly mentioned these genres and some links can therefore be made to games and films, the teachers had chosen them specifically for these reasons. Therefore, in terms of class reading, the boys lacked agency and the genres offered were limited in range.

The reading of books individually was met with mixed reactions. Some boys struggled, as they did with the writing tasks, with the length of focus required. There were also issues with trying to carry out a lengthy and passive activity requiring concentration in the primary school environment. Individual reading involved free choice and this ability to change books often resulted in books being abandoned half way through and allowed boys the freedom to 'give up'. This was unlike any other activity at school where all tasks had to be completed even if they were challenging and required help. There was therefore the view that giving up on books was acceptable and was the 'fault' of the book rather than the skill, perseverance or judgement of the reader.

J: Can I have a show of hands, who likes reading? You sort of like reading then?

Jake: Yes, I like reading a good book, but if, like, I'm getting bored of it. It's too long for me. I don't like it, I change

Lewis: I like it because, like, some books are based on a real

story. So you, like, know about real stuff

Jake: Well, I like it because most of the books, they have a star, like movies and a lot of people like movies. So it's basically the same, but you don't watch it, you read it

Michael: I like reading because I'm good at it and I'm good speller, so I can spell out words and I can help other people if they can't do it

Lewis: It's alright but..just they have lots of different books but they just haven't got the right sort of book. They have lots of different books that you might not have heard of, but they don't have many books that you like reading at home

J: But you like reading at home where you choose your own books?

Lewis: Yes

Sam: I like sci-fi books and action things like Alex Ryder books. They're really good, some are quite long, but some are quite short. The long ones you just end up getting fed up with, but the more you read into it, it becomes more fun

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

J: Right, ok. So it's more straightforward. What about the reading bit of literacy? Toby, reading? Like it?



Toby: Yes, the reading part of literacy. Sometimes...I like it. It's just sometimes I don't understand it when it comes to prepositional phrases and all that

J But reading stories in books though, do you like that?

Toby: Most of the time

J: Finlay?

Finbar: If they're too hard, what I do is just read a page name and just put it down and then find another one

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

J: So do you just give up on books then?

Finn: No

Robbie: Yes, sometimes

Finn: Well I read them sometimes when I'm not doing anything, and then sometimes when I think of something, I just put it down and go...

*(Year 4, group discussion)*

A common reason for not liking reading individually was the inability to be able to follow the plot for the period of time necessary to complete a whole book although this did not seem problematic when a book was shared and could be discussed or

used for other related activities. Again, for boys who disliked more passive activities, books were enjoyable when shared and when the task was led by someone else. In the same way that literacy generally could be broken down into component parts in terms of enjoyability, reading was also discussed as being enjoyable to all in the sharing of stories but often laborious as a solo pursuit.

Isaac: With the book that we're reading, sometimes when we do it, I'm like..this book has got way too many characters and I'm not keeping up with who's doing what. I mean, it's so confusing me. Like, I just started reading. It's got a bit too many characters and so it's sort of, making me lose the plot

Ben G: My dad reads to me sometimes. Like he reads Percy Jackson and the Harry Potter series

Lewis: I've read Harry Potter as well

J: Do you prefer to read stories or non-fiction – fact

Isaac: Stories

Ollie: Stories

J: Does anybody prefer...

Ben: I like fantasy stories...and I like detective stories. I'm reading 'Stormbreaker' at the moment

Lewis: I like 'Room 13'

*Year 5, group discussion)*

None of the boys discussed reading as a method of study although some did talk about having books on particular topics which were of interest to them. There was an awareness that non-fiction books could be a source of knowledge and a way of learning but boys made firmer links to pleasure and storytelling. As demonstrated by Robbie, the computer was more explicitly linked to research and 'YouTube' as a method of learning at home:

J: Ok, do you like reading as well?

Robbie: mmmm.....I'll tell you what I do like. I like history because I quite like the RAF, the World War II RAF

J: So if you like something like the RAF, would you go and look it some more on the computer or books?

Robbie: I'm interested in it and I'm quite happy to learn more about it

J: But would you go home and do that or do you just learn in school?

Robbie: I would learn in school, try and learn....I go on YouTube sometimes to try and learn

J: Is that a good way to learn? YouTube?

Robbie: Well, you can see on videos or...I think it is

J: Are you good at your ICT skills?

Robbie: Yes

J: Do you prefer to do writing or work on the computer?

Robbie: I prefer to work on the computer

*(Year 4, interview)*

#### **7.4.5 Emotional and empathetic response**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the response to showing emotion and even crying by both boys and girls was largely talked of as being acceptable. At the end of year 6, two boys expressed the idea that perhaps girls were more able to cry than boys but even this statement was expressed with an awareness that such an idea was probably 'from olden times'. The explicit inclusion of social and emotional aspects of learning in the curriculum appeared to have resulted in a school culture where boys were expected to discuss 'problems' and how they or others might feel. Teachers often mediated so that disagreements could be aired and resolved and there was also a focus on considering the experiences of others and to value 'caring'. However, whilst the explicit message about the need to discuss and resolve issues was clear, there was an implicit gendered differentiation in that some boys had the perception that girls spent more time receiving teacher mediated help to 'bond' them and that physical fighting between boys was more accepted and taken less seriously than physical fights between girls. In short, the girls were expected to talk and air their emotions more and there was a growing culture throughout the years that boys would be more likely to resolve differences by less talk and more physical action. This idea, however, did

not extend to the study of literacy at Primary level and none of the boys explicitly expressed any discomfort in discussing how characters felt, or in analysing more emotional writing such as poetry. At this point in their education, poetry was often enjoyed as it was short and manageable as opposed to longer novels and some of the boys enjoyed the freedom to explore their meanings rather than having to think of ideas of their own. Poems were also linked to lyrics, rap and poetry slams so that it was associated with music rather than any knowledge of classic poetry as might be understood by an older student. The basic features of poems such as rhymes were easy to identify and fun to think of as an activity. In general, the study of poetry posed no problems in terms of discussion of feelings, which appeared to be a part of the curriculum, and the boys spoke of tasks involving empathetic response as easy to manage. Poems and analysis of texts were also always studied in the context of reading aloud along with a great deal of scaffolding and discussion which appeared to be favoured by the boys. The extent to which this was enjoyed is seen in Jack's comments on his willingness to look for more poems on the internet to use for his own stories and James' willingness to write his own poetry despite rejecting the thinking process required for writing stories at school.

J:           What kind of things do you enjoy doing in literacy?

Joel:       Making up stories. Just, like, an adventure kind of thing

J:           Do you look at poems and things like that?

Joel: Yes, like Haiku ones and stuff like that

J: Do you enjoy that kind of stuff as well?

Joel: Yes

J: And do you look at characters and think about how they might feel?

Joel: Yes. Like description of character. Their diary type thing

J: Do you enjoy things like that?

Joel: Yes

*(Year 6, interview)*

J: When you do literacy, do you ever look at poetry and things that?

Jon: Sometimes, yes. Well, most of the times

J: Do you every have to talk, in literacy, about the poems and writing and the way the character feels...

Jon: Yes

J: ...do you like doing that sort of thing?

Jon: Yes. You get to think of your ideas

J: Do you try to imagine yourself as that character in the story : things like that?

Jon: Yes. I enjoy that kind of activity

J: What kind of activities do you do?

Jon: I just like making my own stories up...and you can, like,  
look on the internet at good poems and stuff and put it into  
your story

J: Do you like poems?

Jon: Yes

J: So what kind of things do you do with poems?

Jon: You, like, look for rhymes...and I like the rhymes and stuff

*(Year 6, interview)*

J: Do you like poetry and things like that?

Seb: Sometimes. It just depends. If I don't think...if I can't think of  
anything to write, then I just do poetry

J: Okay. Would you write your own poems?

Seb: Sometimes

J: Would you write poetry at home?

Seb: Like, sometimes..it just depends on if you don't think of  
anything to write, then I do poetry

J: Would you write your own stories at home, like not anything to  
do with school?

J: Sometimes...like.. but it will be different than just going...it will  
be different. It will be like an event story, quest story,  
something like that. When I do kind of write my own songs...

they don't work out as well as I thought they would be

*(Year 6, interview)*

## **7.5 Summary**

This chapter provided a discussion to answer the final research question of whether the gendered performancies and subjectivities of boys impacts upon their perception of the study of literacy at Primary school. It has demonstrated that the view of literacy is bound up in a culture of wanting to succeed at school and shown that there is a general compliance amongst young boys in terms of the need to be challenged and strive for success in SATs, often based on rather mature concerns about their future. The intrinsic motivation to 'do well' at all subjects, including literacy, has been internalised to such an extent that in the early years it is not challenged in terms of its value.

With regards to the curriculum, young boys talk of subjects including literacy as being both for girls and boys and very few distinctions are made between genders in terms of preference and achievement. However, there does seem to be evidence of a 'hidden curriculum' in that moving through the years, boys talk of constructing their masculine identities as being very different from girls, particularly in terms of expectations in behaviour and interests. By the end of Year 6, these



ideas appear as common themes in discussion - girls are expected to be better behaved and need to plan more; boys are more physically active and need to show a level of 'toughness' and classroom rebellion. However, whilst these gender stereotypes may seem unsurprising, the inclusion of these ideals in a desirable construct of masculinity is carefully policed so that the focus on achieving in classroom based activities is still highly valued and any behaviour which impacts upon this negatively is widely frowned upon. Therefore, achievement in literacy is still highly prized, admired by peers and results in prestige and status.

Many boys offered a rich and complex view of literacy as they were able to readily identify its component parts so that discussion moved from very generalised liking or disliking to analysing and appraising the different skills required. Activities such as reading were not presented as simply one boy with one book but talked of as being multi-contextual and taking place in a number of different ways. Storytelling was spoken of as being highly valued and enjoyable in contrast to the reading of books as a solo pursuit, to which there were more mixed reactions. The expressive and emotional response required to explore texts posed no problems for any of the boys and there was no evidence of any discomfort, which could possibly be linked to a culture where social and emotional aspects of learning are part of the curriculum and all children are encouraged to discuss their feelings as part of developing empathetic response. Most of the negative comments about

activities in literacy centred around either the length of tasks, the physical act of writing or the difficulty in generating ideas for stories.

Amongst the younger boys in Year 4, there was little to comment on in terms of what could be defined as a specifically gendered response to literacy. However, it could be argued that the prevalence of the frustration with 'coming up with ideas' in writing which seemed to become more common by Year 6 did appear to be connected to the value increasingly placed on sporting activity in the playground. As the boys began to reject imaginative playground games as 'babyish' and turned to achieving in competitive and active games as a self worth strategy, other pursuits which did not fit into this mould were not deemed to be quite as enjoyable and indeed, boys who did not fit in with this model of masculinity were not considered to be as popular. This appeared to be a nascent idea of equating more passive activities with being boring. In particular, the idea of the 'thinking' and 'planning' required in literacy was spoken of as 'doing nothing', as was individual reading which was spoken of as too lengthy when boys would rather have 'something to do'. Reading also seemed to be problematic when it was not enjoyed as a group activity and it was not possible to interact with others for a 'lengthy' period of time. Furthermore, as the activities of girls in the playground in Year 6, followed a pattern of 'giving up on' sport and indulging instead in more passive activities such as sitting and talking it could also be suggested that 'passive' might, for the boys, equate to 'feminine'.

The pedagogical implications in these findings are that for boys who do not achieve in literacy, this could be a pivotal stage in the process of rejecting school work which is passive and, therefore, 'boring', in favour of concentrating on physical prowess and toughness as a way to compete with peers. As girls are already, by year 6, perceived as less physically tough or aggressive, more emotional and more compliant and well behaved in the classroom, this could also consolidate a binary view which equates behaviour which engenders academic success as being more feminine. It could be argued, therefore, that a model is emerging for boys who cannot achieve, to still enact a highly desirable and even hegemonic construct of masculinity which rejects literacy and, indeed, academic achievement, in favour of demonstrating physical prowess and a certain level of 'naughtiness' in the classroom, in order to gain status with peers. The final chapter will discuss the findings from both this chapter and Chapters 6 and 7 in order to draw some conclusions from this thesis and make some recommendations based on the findings.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusions: Implications for Pedagogy and Recommendations for Further Research**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This project began for me a number of years ago at the point when my sons were completing Primary School and being prepared to enter the world of an all boys' High School. It was certainly a time for worry. Would my quiet and studious twin be bullied daily? Would my sporty yet academic twin disappear into the football team and forget schoolwork altogether? Would either make it to the local college so I could teach them 'A' level English? Based on the numbers of young men enrolled for English Literature, I imagined not. However, all of these assumptions were rooted in my own very subjective and gendered view of literacy and indeed, academic study, for that girls are generally more inclined to read and study and boys who do likewise are bullied boffins, somehow appears to be a widely acknowledged truth. As I embarked on my own doctoral programme, these concerns which were played out both in my own mind and in the media every year around GCSE results time, gave rise to my research focus throughout the following years.

I began this study with the consideration of my questions in a broad context starting with the idea of boys' literacy achievement as compared to girls and discovered that whilst the reality of the disparity at GCSE appeared to be evident, the competing discourses discussing the reasons for any gap in achievement differed widely depending on whether it emanated from professionals, scholars or the popular press. Added to this was the contested nature of gender itself and whether this was biological in nature or enacted and socially constructed. Worryingly, many of the pedagogical responses to address any gap in achievement often appeared to embed a binary view of gender rather than questioning it.

Following an initial pilot study in a secondary school, I found evidence which confirmed well documented studies (Jackson, 2004, Martino, 2010) which detailed a 'too cool for school' attitude amongst boys who rejected reading and writing. I also found that boys who did engage well with literacy spoke of not wanting to be perceived as enjoying or excelling in literate activities in case they were perceived negatively by peers as 'spofs' or 'nerds'. However, what also emerged was that some boys managed to balance being a high achiever both in and out of the classroom. I therefore, turned my focus on Primary School to explore how, why and at what point ideas of rejecting the study of literacy emerge and how boys who achieve and still maintain their popularity manage the process. Thus, I developed a research focus to explore whether the way in which boys actively construct,

manage and negotiate their masculine identity in the primary school environment impacted on their perception of literacy.

This study has sought to illuminate the Primary School experience of boys and this has been done with particular reference to theories of both the construction of gender and the influence of the school environment. The findings expose some of the uncertainties for young boys posed by contemporary life where gender roles have been eroded and yet old expectations of 'manliness' remain, the messages of which are delivered implicitly though a 'hidden curriculum' delivered through both school and the modern media. A hegemonic order of masculinities (Connell, 2005) is apparent and increasingly so as the years progress but other aspects of being a boy appear to be more fluid and recognisable in a post cultural understanding (Butler, 2004, Whitehead, 2001).

This chapter draws together the findings based on the analysis of the data and in order to present some conclusions in terms of pedagogy and the need for further research, I first of all return to the research questions originally posed.

## **8.2 How boys talk about their perception of academic success or failure**

Whereas many studies carried out in secondary schools (Jackson, 2004, Martino, 2010) point to boys' rejection of academic study, I found that at Primary level the desire to achieve was deeply rooted and there was a level of conformity in terms of boys wanting to meet the expectation for them to perform academically.

Chapter 6 demonstrates how the boys discuss achieving at school in terms of grades as being of value to them and this is particularly marked in the early years when there is a feeling amongst most that it is possible to succeed. This culture of competing and progressing seems to be deeply entrenched amongst all of the boys and it is not until Year 6, after the SATs that comments which express more negative emotions such as feeling under pressure and disappointment begin to emerge. In such a climate of concern over achievement there was a discernible pattern that it took on a gravitas with age and the notion of doing well was bound up with fears and hopes for the future so that a love of learning and knowledge for its own sake was never discussed. Indeed, learning was mostly linked to subsequent grades and there was a consistent connection made between academic success and future employment. This meant that the boys' discourse surrounding education was its role in achieving 'real world' success as judged through material gain and wealth.

The reiteration of the concepts of 'struggle' and 'challenge' in many of the interviews exemplified their expectations of academic study so that they understood and accepted the need to work through difficult tasks to progress. Progress made by individuals was widely commented on by peers and resulted in a level of status and also, a degree of popularity, such was the power of being able to excel. However, coupled with this was the policing of behaviour in terms of boasting so that, often, boys required the cooperation of their peers to recognise their achievements and there was an almost implicit understanding that it was necessary to compliment peers in order to receive a similar recognition in return. However, this did create an atmosphere of celebrating each other which appeared to me, as an observer, to demonstrate some core value of kindness to others so that there was a consideration of others and their 'face needs' which counterbalanced the competitive environment at school where the boys were implicitly but consistently competing. Negative labels such as 'smartypants' were attached to boys who achieved highly at school but this often appeared as a result of boasting which was perceived negatively rather than the actual academic success which was greatly admired, and in certain cases, envied.

In a culture where there was such an intrinsic value and motivation to be graded, literacy was not rejected in terms of its value as a subject by any of the boys and it appeared that all of those interviewed understood its value as a key component of the curriculum, along with maths. The boys were very aware of the curriculum and both literacy and maths were viewed as core subjects and appeared to be placed



above all other subjects in terms of importance in the context of being measured in terms of grade.

### **8.3 How boys construct, manage and negotiate their masculine identities within the primary school context?**

Boys perform and transform many different versions of masculinity in various contexts (Rowan, 2002) and thus, it is no surprise that even within the microcosm of Primary School, boys distinguished between behaviour in the classroom and behaviour in the playground. Thus, patterns emerged of how boys were grouped in terms of adherence to different preferences when at play, the impact of which was seen in the creation of a dual culture of boys and girls and in later years, between different constructions of masculinity.

By year 6, whilst there was still a prevailing view of literacy, as with other subjects, of being non- gender specific, there was a growing culture of difference between boys and girls in terms of playground activities and preferences. This confirms findings from other studies such as that of Thorne (1997) who found evidence of single-sex friendship groups which served to create and strengthen gender boundaries. This, indeed, seemed to be the case as girls were discussed as 'giving up' on sport which, by year 6, had become the domain of the boys and

from which emerged a culture of playground football which set boys not only apart from girls, but from other boys as well.

Throughout the interviews an expectation emerged that boys were more physical, the evidence for which was often evidenced implicitly in discussion of the jobs which were hoped for, the idolisation of footballing heroes and the knowledge of who was the strongest in the class. Other desirable constructs of masculinity were also seen in the need to be competitive, slightly naughty and to be funny which was set against expectations for girls who were perceived as having to be more well behaved and compliant, thus confirming ideas that school is a powerful tool in shaping gender expectations (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). However, whilst some of these constructions agree with the findings of previous studies (Alloway, 1997, Martino, 2000, Whitehead, 2002), inside the Primary School classroom there was still a value placed on academic achievement and behaviours which did not engender this were policed amongst the boys so that they did not impact negatively on study. In fact, there were narrow boundaries for acceptable behaviour in which it was not desirable to be naughty to a level which disrupted the learning environment.

What emerged was a complex picture of masculinity which at times was traditional and hegemonic in nature whilst at other times indicative of a more fluid construction which reflected the erosion of gender roles. There was therefore, a

delicate balancing act between behaviour in and out of the classroom which was required to achieve popularity amongst peers.

.

#### **8.4 What gender performances and subjectivities intersect with the acceptance or rejection of the study of literacy?**

The findings of this study indicate that, whilst in the younger years there appears to be little to comment on in terms of literacy and gender, that as the years progress there are performances and subjectivities discussed by the boys which do intersect with the acceptance or rejection of the study of literacy.

At Primary level, the value of literacy is bound up in a culture of wanting to succeed at school so that there is a general conformity amongst young boys that they need to be successful in SATs. This is based on concerns about their future but perhaps also indicative of the desire for praise from teachers, peers and possibly also parents. As boys are aware of the requirements of the early years curriculum, literacy is recognised as a key focus and, along with maths, both are often spoken of and compared rather than other subjects which appear to be secondary in importance. The intrinsic motivation to 'do well' at literacy, has been internalised to such an extent that it is not challenged in terms of its value.

However, by year 6 the dual culture of boys and girls is more noticeable in the playground and some boys do appear to have abandoned imaginative games as 'babyish' in favour of very physical games and pursuits. This culture in the prestige placed on physical prowess is perhaps where the gendered subjectivity towards study may begin in that it serves to highlight passive pursuits, to some boys, as being dull. There is therefore a link between boys who are heavily invested in the playground sports culture and the 'rejection' of classroom activities that involve quiet focus and concentration. The culture of gaining peer respect through physical prowess at football also offers a way to achieve for those who are becoming more aware that they may not be able to compete in reading and writing activities.

An emergent culture is present in Year 6 where the construction of masculinity is relational to femininity and in a contemporary world where so many of the gender roles have been eroded, the difference is enacted through sporting prowess, particularly football. This developing sporting community of practice offers ways to compete against peers, demonstrate toughness and also offers the opportunity to create and maintain friendships both in and out of school. The playground space allows boys to gain prestige through being funny and indulging in acts of minor rebellion and naughtiness even though, at this stage, it is still unacceptable in the classroom. However unlike the findings in studies at secondary school, the culture of playground football, is not embedded enough to offer an alternative to success in literacy and several boys commented, when asked, that they would

rather be good at literacy than football. However, the findings of the study show that boys who managed to be sporting in the playground and successful in their grades in the classroom achieved what could be argued is the most desirable construct of masculinity for young boys, as demonstrated by their popularity with their peers.

Another gendered subjectivity at Primary School was that the behaviour of girls was expected to be more compliant and they were also perceived as both needing, and being able, to plan more; as focus and concentration were increasingly discussed as necessary in some activities required for literacy, it could therefore be argued that whilst this was not commented on explicitly by the boys, that literacy is already being constructed as more 'feminine'. Hence, some of the activities required in literacy were discussed as being passive and dull but the overall need to compete and do well at it gave it a value which was beyond its component parts. A correlation could be seen between a willingness to try in all the activities and whether the boy in question felt that this would ultimately result in competing successfully with peers.

A further element to the study of literacy and the view of it amongst boys appeared to be affected by new technologies. Many boys made a link between storytelling and the genres of fantasy and adventure common to many modern games. Indeed, the gaming culture, offered many non-sporting boys a way to achieve peer status by being very knowledgeable about games and progressing to different

levels when competing. Like football, it also offered the opportunity to 'socialise' with friends and groups outside of school which strengthened bonds and formed teams. This meant that whilst some boys viewed the planning of stories and generating of ideas as passive and dull, the ability to do this was still admired in others, especially if their ideas for stories were similar to gaming formats. This gaming culture, like football, was gendered and predominantly considered a male domain so that in most discussions of storytelling and books, conversation often moved to genres found in online gaming or popular films.

Beyond the acceptance of gaming as an activity, however, most passive activities were equated with girls, such as 'sitting and talking' and 'planning' and this is perhaps where, it could be argued, that there is an emergent culture of a gendered view of certain elements of literacy as being passive and therefore feminine. Thus, as boys are beginning to reject femininity and construct themselves as young men, there follows a logical conclusion that this may be a pivotal stage in the process of rejecting literacy which is passive in favour of concentrating on physical prowess and toughness as a way to compete with peers. Certainly, the findings suggest that boys who feel that they can compete both in and out of the classroom do so, whilst boys who are starting to realise that they do not 'measure up' academically are already engaging in behaviour such as being naughty in the class and concentrating on their performance at sport. Boys who managed to do neither of these were the only ones who expressed an anxiousness and seemed to struggle in the school environment.

## **8.5 Pedagogical implications and recommendations**

Some of the findings in this study offer an important challenge to some widely held beliefs about boys and their engagement with the study of literacy. Contrary to findings in secondary schools, I was unable to find any boys who did not wish to achieve and who were disengaged or disaffected with the subject. Also, contrary to many unsupported beliefs about boys which drive pedagogical practice, there was no reluctance to engage with books and stories or discomfort offering emotional responses to texts. In fact, they expressed a love of storytelling and poetry and placed a value on literacy as being a key component, essential for their success at school.

The enactment of one socially sanctioned heteronormative version of masculinity was not to be found and instead, my participants varied greatly as individuals to such an extent that perhaps as suggested by Smith and Wilhelm (2009), gender may no longer be a useful lens through which to view the questions surrounding boys and their schooling and particularly literacy. Certainly, whilst some patterns of positioning themselves in relation to girls were apparent, the view of the orientation to literacy could be viewed more effectively in terms of preferences in the activities included.

As I listened to my participants, whilst it was possible to see an emergent culture of rejecting some elements of literacy as passive and dull, it appeared, by the end of year 6, to be part of a greater disappointment at being unable to compete with others. Hence, there are issues with the growing focus on 'competitive education' and how early this starts.

Another finding from the study is that there is much to be learned from what the boys loved about literacy, what excited them and what made it, in their eyes, worthwhile, beyond the need to do well in the SATs. It is interesting to note that all of the boys enjoyed books which were used as a springboard for other activities and this appeared to lead to the greatest engagement. This 'topic based' holistic approach to learning was clearly motivational and allowed boys to explore books from a number of different perspectives so that all of the boys were engaged on some level and thus, all were able to feel and share some sense of achievement. This is the type of approach that is immediately lost on moving to secondary school where subjects are delivered discretely. Perhaps then, I would argue, that Year 7 is too soon to lose the advantages that such a pedagogical approach delivers.

A further thread to how literacy is taught at Primary level is the multi-contextual approach to reading, where it is not always a solo activity but instead books are shared and used as a tool for a range of enjoyable tasks. This brings into sharp



focus the question of what literacy is and how it is measured. Many of the boys showed a high level of competence when computers were used rather than hand writing. They enjoyed finding poems through research on the internet and adding their own to poetry forums to be read by others. They were adept at using new technologies to perform a range of different functions including song writing and making videos and cartoons. All of these can be identified as requiring literacy skills and yet none are measured in any formal sense to allow different boys the chance to display their different skills. This is particularly pertinent in a climate where the requirements for success at GCSE have become narrower with the removal of the speaking and listening component from the final grade as well as the study of spoken language. It is puzzling how, in a world reliant on new technologies which necessitate a wide range of literacy skills, that children are denied the opportunity to show talents through a greater range of mediums. I would therefore suggest that the move towards narrowing the English curriculum as it moves to secondary school and the removal of coursework which could have been widened to measure a greater range of competencies reduces engagement, participation and alternative routes to achieve.

The findings also demonstrate how there is a disconnect between the message that the boys have internalised that education is for employment and the ways in which literacy skills are measured; there is currently no inclusion of being able to write emails or reports or any other literacy tasks which are based in the workplace other than in the Functional Skills curriculum, an exam which has recently been

removed as an alternative to the compulsory resit at post-16. The data from this study reveals that the existence of multiple forms of literacy is widespread amongst the boys both in and out of the school context and yet as none of this is measurable, none of it counts, despite the growing role of the use of social media and computer mediated communication in the workplace. Further research is therefore needed to investigate how different literacies are achieved and how these might be included in a modern curriculum which would allow for more flexibility in measuring competency.

Finally, there is no denying that social pressure plays a part in how young boys view different constructs of masculinity and until this is explored, teachers too are unable to see the part that the 'hidden curriculum' they engender plays. Critical literacy approaches (Disenhaus, 2015) can help as they enable the invisible workings of culture to be brought to the surface so that boys can be made aware of gender constructions and how this might impact on their ways of 'doing boy'. This is perhaps an area which also needs further research so that dissolving gender boundaries can be made a part of the curriculum in a way that is accessible to young children in the hope that those constructions which actively prevent boys and girls from achieving their full potential are consigned to the past.

## **8.6 Limitations and conclusion**

This study was carried out as a qualitative study amongst the boys from years 4, 5 and 6 of a single Primary School and therefore has several limitations based on the relatively small cohort of boys. Firstly, it cannot be suggested that the views expressed are representative of all young boys even though an approach was taken whereby all of the boys in those years were spoken to prior to the sampling for individual interviews. It is acknowledged that the constructions of masculinity evidenced in the data, are by no means exhaustive and will have been impacted on not only by their age but also their socioeconomic and family background. Certainly, the selection of a school from a relatively affluent area, will have resulted in a particular class profile in terms of background despite the number of looked after children who attend the school. However, whilst the impact of cultural capital cannot be dismissed in the boys' orientation to progressing and achieving at school, this has already been well documented elsewhere, and the element of minimising variables and choosing a small school can be justified in the climate it creates for finding and investigating communities of practice. A further limitation of the study is the fact that it interviewed only boys and there may have been a further perspective to be gained by interviewing girls. There may also have been merit in conducting interviews with teachers and conducting observations in order to witness the impact of teacher/pupil interaction. Given the changing climate for young boys and girls in terms of gender roles and indeed, the culture of schooling,

further study would be useful to support and expand on these findings to include both genders and perhaps a larger sample, across different schools.

With any qualitative data there is always the risk of researcher bias and, especially with younger children, misinterpreting their meanings. It is also true that some of the young boys may not have been able to fully express their experience as a result of not having the language to articulate it. Thus, it is also a limitation that the delicate balance of the researcher and the participant was susceptible to disruption in the process of an adult talking to a child.

Despite some of its limitations, this study still provides a perspective of how boys develop a gendered sense of self in the contemporary Primary School context and how this impacts on their perception of literacy. Perhaps an unexpected facet of this is the part played by the modern culture of league tables, grading and competition. The data shows how boys orientate themselves to a climate of new expectations against a backdrop of the pressure to conform to older stereotypes of masculinity and the delicate balancing act which is required.

The study also calls into question the definition of what literacy is and whether the ways in which it is measured is appropriate in a world where new technologies are becoming increasingly important; the pressure to be fluent in computer mediated communication has never been higher and yet whilst these are considered in pedagogy this is largely ignored within the study of literacy. Certainly the range of

literacies required has not resulted in a range of ways to demonstrate competency. My study has also showed how boys successfully engage with reading and writing through a multi-contextual approach and this is perhaps a unique contribution which could offer an insight to inform educational policy and practice at secondary level so that boys can continue to experience the pleasure and power of literacy as a means to engage with all areas of study.

## References

Aboum, S. (2013) *Plural masculinities: The remaking of the self in private life*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing

Adams, R. and Savran, D. (2002) *The masculinities studies reader*. Oxford: Blackwell

Alloway, N. (2007) Swimming against the tide: Boys, literacies and schooling: An Australian story. *Canadian Journal of Education*. Vol. 30 (2) p.582-605

Alloway, N., & Gilbert, P. (1997). Boys and Literacy: lessons from Australia. *Gender and Education*, 9 (1) pp. 49-60

Arnett, G. (2014) GCSE results: the biggest gap in 11 years between boys and girls A\*-C pass rate. *The Guardian* 21<sup>st</sup> August 2014 [accessed online, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2014]

Arnold, D. S. & Whitehurst, G. S. (1994) Accelerating language development through picture book reading: a summary of dialogic reading and its effects in D. K. Dickens, (ed.) *Bridges to literacy, children, families and schools*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell

Askew, S. and Ross, C. (1988). *Boys don't cry; boys and sexism in education*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Augustinuous, M. and Walker, I. (1995). *Social Cognition: An integrated introduction*. London: Sage Publications

Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (2003). *Higher Education and Social Class: issues of exclusion and inclusion*. London: Routledge

Baker, C. and Freebody, C. (1989). *Children's first schoolbooks: Introductions to the culture of literacy*. Oxford: Blackwell

Ball, S.J. (2013) *Foucault, power, and education*. New York: Routledge.

Barnes, C. (2012) It's no laughing matter...Boys' humour and the performance of defensive masculinities in the classroom. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21 (3) pp. 239-251

Barrett, F. (2001) The organizational construction of hegemonic masculinity: The case of the US Navy, in Whitehead, S. and Barrett, F. (Eds) *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity

Bartholomaeus, C. (2012) I'm not allowed wrestling stuff: Hegemonic masculinity and primary school. *Journal of Sociology*, 48 (3) pp. 227-247

Bartholomaeus, C. (2013). Colluding with or challenging hegemonic masculinity? *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28 (7), pp. 279-293.

Baumann, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity

Beasley, C. (2008) Rethinking hegemonic masculinity in a globalizing world. *Men and Masculinities*, 11 (1), pp. 86-103

Beynon, H., Grimshaw, D., Rubery, J. and Ward, K. (2002). *Managing employment change : the new realities of work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beynon, H. and Nichols, T. (2006). *Patterns of work in the post-Fordist era; Fordism and post-Fordism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Beynon, J. (2001). *Masculinities and culture*. Buckingham: Open University.

Bhana, D. (2008) Six packs and big muscles, and stuff like that: Primary school aged South African boys, black and white, on sport. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29 (1), pp. 3-14

Biddulph, S. (2003) *Raising boys: why boys are different - and how to help them become happy and well-balanced men*. London: Thorsons.

Blaise, M. (2005) *Playing it straight: uncovering gender discourses in the early childhood classroom*. Oxford: Routledge

Bleach, K.C. (1998a) (ed.) *Raising boys' achievement in schools*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

Bleach, K.C. (1998b). What Difference does it make? In K.C. Bleach (ed.) *Raising boys' achievement in schools*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

Bleach, K.C. (1998c). Why the likely lads lag behind. In K.C. Bleach (ed.) *Raising boys' achievement in schools*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

Bly, J. (1992) *Iron John: A book about men*. Shaftesbury: Element



Blumenfeld- Jones, D. (1995) Fidelity as a criterion for practising and valuing narrative enquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8 (1) pp. 25-33

Books for Boys (2010). [www.booksforboys.com](http://www.booksforboys.com) [accessed online 4<sup>th</sup> January 2012]

Bowen, G. A. (2006). Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(3), 12-23.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. C. (1977) *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: Sage Publications

Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital in Richardson, J.G. (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press

Bourdieu, P. (2001) *Masculine domination*. Oxford: Polity

Brandth, B. and Haugen, M. S. (2007) Gendered work in family farm tourism. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 38 (3) pp. 380-393

Browne, N. and France, P. (1986) *Untying the apron strings: anti sexist provision for the under fives*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Brownhill, S. (2014) Build me a male role model! A critical exploration of the perceived qualities/characteristics of men in the early years (0-8) in England. *Gender and Education*, 26 (3) pp. 246-261

Brozo, W. G. (2005). Gender and reading literacy. *Reading Today*, 22 (4) pp.18

Brozo, W. G., Sulkunen, S., Shiel, G., Garbe, C. and Pandien, A. (2014) Reading, gender and engagement. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 26 (3) pp. 246-231

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructivism*. Abingdon:Routledge

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble*. London: Routledge

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter; on the discursive limits of "sex"*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Carter, R. A., Walker, R. J. and Brumfit, C. J., (eds). (1989). *Literature and the learner: Methodological approaches*. London: Macmillan.

Cillesseesen, A. H., Schwartz, D. and Mayeux, L. (2011). *Popularity in the peer system*. New York: Guilford Press.

Clare, A.W. (2001). *On men; masculinity in crisis*. London: Arrow.

Clark, S. and Paetcher, C. (2007). Learning gender in primary school playgrounds. *Pedagogy, culture and society*, 15 (3) pp. 317-331

Close, R. (2001) *Parental involvement and literacy achievement: The research evidence and the way forward*. London: National Literacy Trust

Coffey, A. and Atkinson, P. (1996) *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and K. Morrison. (eds) (2011). *Research methods in education*. Abingdon: Routledge

Coleman, W. (1990) Doing masculinity/ Doing theory, in Hearn, J. & Morgan, D. (eds.) *Men, masculinities and social theory*. London: Unwin Hyman

Connell, R. W. (1983) *Which way is up?: Essays on sex, class and culture*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin

Connell, R.W. (1987) *Gender and power :society, the person and sexual politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Connell, R.W. (1989) 'Cool guys, swots and wimps': the interplay of masculinity and education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 15 pp. 291-303

Connell, R.W. (1995) *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Connell, R.W. (2000) *The men and the boys*. Cambridge: Polity.

Connell, R.W. (2005) *Masculinities*. 2nd. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Connell, R.W., Messerschmidt, J.W. and Kerfoot, D. (2005) *Hegemonic masculinity*. *Gender and Society*, 19(6) pp. 829-859

Connell, R. (2008) Masculinity construction and sports in boys' education: a framework for thinking about the issue. *Sport, Education & Society*, 13(2), pp. 131-145.

Connell, R. (2008b) A Thousand Miles from Kind: Men, Masculinities and Modern Institutions. *Journal of Men's Studies*, 16(3), pp. 237-252.

Connell, R. and Pearse, R. (2015) *Gender: in world perspective*. 3rd edn. Cambridge: Polity.

Connolly, P. (2004) *Boys and schooling in the early years*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Coward, R. (1999) *Sacred Cows*. London: Harper Collins

Crawford, M. (1995) *Talking difference on gender and language*. London: Sage.

Cullen, F. (2010) 'Two's up and poncing fags': young women's smoking practices, reciprocity and friendship. *Gender & Education*, 22(5), pp. 491-504.

Crawford, M. (1995) *Talking Difference: on Gender and Language*. London: Sage

Cresswell, J. W. (1994) *Research Design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. CA: Sage Publications

David, M., Edwards, R., and P. Alldred, (2000) Children and school based research: 'informed consent' or 'educated consent'? *British Educational Research Journal*, 27 (3) pp. 347-365

Davies, J. in Heighton, L. (2014) Most fathers 'don't want shared paternity leave'. *The Telegraph*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2014 [accessed online 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2014]

Deem, R. (1996) Border Territories: A journey through sociology, education and women's studies. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 17 (1) pp. 5-19

Demetriou, D. Z. (2001) Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique. *Theory and Society* 30 (3) pp. 337-61.

Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005) *Handbook of qualitative research*. CA: Sage Publications

DfES (2010) *Primary school performance tables*.  
[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-at-key-stage-2](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-at-key-stage-2) [accessed on 12th August 2016]

Disenhaus, N. (2015) *Boys, writing, and the literacy gender gap: What we know, what we think we know*. Vermont: University of Vermont

Drever, E. (2003) *Using Semi-structured Interviews*. Glasgow: SCRE University of Glasgow

Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003) *Language and gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Epstein, D. (1997). Boys own stories: masculinities and sexualities in schools. *Gender and Education* 9 (1), 105-115

Epstein, D. (1998). *Failing boys?* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Epstein, D., Ellwood, J., Hey, V. & Maw, J. (eds.) (1998) *Failing boys? Issues in gender and achievement*. Buckingham: Open University Press

Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Fine, G. A. and Sandstrom, K. (1998) Knowing children: Participant observation with minors. *Qualitative Research Methods, Series 15*. Thousand Oakes: Sage

Fontana, A. & Frey, J. H. (2005) The interview: From neural stance to political involvement, in Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research* CA: Sage Publications

Foucault, M. (1980) *Power knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Brighton: Harvester Press.

Foucault, M. (2000) *Power: Essential Works of Foucault (1954-1984) Vol. 3*. London: Penguin

Foucault, M. (2002). *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Francis, B. (1997) Discussing discrimination: Children's construction of sexism between pupils in primary school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18 (4) pp. 519-532

Francis, B. (1998) *Power plays: Primary school children's constructions of gender, power and adult work*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books

Francis, B. (1999). Lads, Lasses and 'new' Labour: 14 - 16 year-old student responses to the 'laddish behaviour and boys' underachievement' debate. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20 (3), pp. 355-371

Francis, B. and Skelton, C. (2001). *Investigating gender: contemporary perspectives in education*. Buckingham: Open University.

Francis, B. (2008). Teaching manfully? Exploring gendered subjectivities and power via analysis of men teachers' gender performance. *Gender & Education*, 20(2), pp. 109-122

Francis, B. (2010). Re/theorising gender: female masculinity and male femininity in the classroom? *Gender & Education*, 22(5), pp. 477-490.

Francis, B. (2010). Modernist Reductionism or Post-structuralist Relativism: Can we move on? *Gender and Education*. 11 (1), pp.381-393

Francis, B., Skelton, C. & Read, B. (2010b) The simultaneous production of educational achievement and popularity: how do some pupils accomplish it? *British Educational Research Journal*, 36 (2) p.317-340

Freebody, P. (2003) *Qualitative research in education*. London: Sage Publications

French, J., French, P. (1988) Gender imbalances in the primary classroom: an interactional account. *Educational Research*, 26, pp. 127-136

Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. & Pattman, R. (2002) *Young masculinities; understanding boys in contemporary society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Frosh, S, Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R (2003) The trouble with boys. *The Psychologist*, 16 (2), pp. 84-92

Gee, J.P. ( 2000) Teenagers in new times: A new literacy studies perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(5), pp. 412-420.

Gee, S. (2013) Bending the codes of masculinity: David Beckham and flexible masculinity in the new millennium. *Sport in Society*, 17 (7) pp. 917-936

Gilbert, P. (1989) Personally (and passively) yours: Girls, literacy and education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 15 pp. 257-265

Gilbert, P. and Gilbert, R. (2001) Masculinity, inequality and post-school opportunities: disrupting oppositional politics about boys' education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 5(1), pp. 1-13.



Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity

Gill, R., Henwood, K. & McLean, C. (2005) Body projects and the regulation of normative masculinity. *Body and Society*, 11 (1) pp. 37-62

Glesne, C. (2011) *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Boston: Pearson

Goddard, A. (2003) 'Is anybody out there?': creative language play and literariness in internet relay chat, in: Schorr, A., Campbell, B. & M. Shank (Eds.) *Communication research and media science in Europe*. pp. 325-343. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter

Gomm, R., Hammersley, M. and Foster, P. (2000) *Case Study Method*. London: Sage

Gottzen, L. (2011) Metaphors of masculinity: Hierarchies and assemblages, presented at GEXcel Conference: *Men and Masculinities Moving On Again!*. 25<sup>th</sup> May, Sweden: Linköping University

Gray, J. (1992) *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*. London: Harper Collins

Griffin, P. (1998) *Strong women, deep closets: Lesbians and homophobia in sports*. Leeds: Human Kinetics

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) Competing paradigms in qualitative research, in Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.Z. (eds) *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oakes: Sage

Gurian, M. & Stevens, K. (2004) With boys and girls in mind. *Closing Achievement Gaps*, 62 (3) pp.21-26

Gurian, M. & Stevens, K. (2004b). *Strategies for teaching boys and girls*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hall, K. (1992) *Locating Power Vol. 1 & 2*. Berkley Women and Language Group: University of California.

Halpern, D., Benbow, C., Geary, D., Gur, R., Shibley Hyde, J. and M. A. Gernsbacher (2007) The science of sex differences in science and maths. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 8 (1) pp. 1-51

Hannan, G. (1999) *Improving Boys' Performance*. INSET materials. Bank Cottage,

Harding, S. (1987) *Feminism and methodology*. Indiana: Indiana University Press

Harris, I. (1995) *The Messages Men Hear: Constructing masculinities*. London: Taylor Francis

Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995) *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing

Hart, D. (2000) *Why girls are beating 'lads'*. [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk). [accessed online 12th August 2016]

Hawley, P. (2003) Pro-social and coercive configurations of resource control in early adolescence: A case for the well adapted Machiavellian. *Merrell-Palmer Quarterly*, 49 pp. 279-309

Haywood, C. & Mac An Ghaill, M. (2003) *Men and masculinities; theory, research and social practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Haywood, C. and Mac An Ghaill, M. (2012) 'What's next for masculinity?' Reflexive directions for theory and research on masculinity and education. *Gender & Education*, 24(6), pp. 577-592.

Heinrich, J. (2012). The making of masculinities: Fighting the forces of hierarchy and hegemony in the High School setting. *High School Journal*, 96(2), pp. 101-115.

Helbig, M. (2012) Boys do not benefit from male teachers in their reading and mathematics skills: empirical evidence from 21 European Union and OECD countries. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(5), pp. 661-677.

Hunter, I. (1988) *Culture and government: the emergence of literary education*. London: Macmillan

Jackson, D. (1998) Breaking out of the binary trap: boys' underachievement, schooling and gender relations, in D. Epstein, J. Ellwood, V. Hey & J. Maw, (eds.). *Failing boys? Issues in gender and achievement* . Buckingham: Open University Press

Jackson, C. (2002) 'Laddishness' as a Self-worth Protection Strategy. *Gender & Education*, 14(1), pp. 37-50.

Jackson, C. (2003) Motives for 'laddishness' at school: fear of failure and fear of the 'feminine'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 29(4), pp. 583-598.

Jackson, C. (2006) *Lads and ladettes in school: Gender and a fear of failure*. Maidenhead: OUP

Jackson, C. and Dempster, S. ( 2009) 'I sat back on my computer ... with a bottle of whisky next to me': constructing 'cool' masculinity through 'effortless' achievement in secondary school . *Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(4), pp. 341-356.

Jackson, C. (2010) 'I've been sort of laddish with them ... one of the gang': teachers' perceptions of 'laddish' boys and how to deal with them. *Gender & Education*, 22(5), pp. 505-519.

Jefferson, T. (1994) Theorizing masculine subjectivity, in T. Newburn, & E. A. Stanko, (eds). *Just boys doing business? Men, masculinities and crime*. London: Routledge.

Jefferson, T. (2002) Subordinating hegemonic masculinity. *Theoretical Criminology*, 6 (1) pp. 63-88

Jensen, J., Hagen, E. & Reddy, C. (eds) (1988) *The feminization of the labour force: paradoxes and promises*. Cambridge: Polity.

Keddie, A. (2006) Fighting, anger, frustration and tears: Matthew's story of hegemonic masculinity. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32 (4) pp. 521-534

Kelvin, P., & Jarrett, J. E. (1985) *Unemployment. Its social psychological effects*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press

Kenway, J. (1998) *Answering back; girls, boys, feminism in schools*. London: Routledge

Kerfoot, D. (2001) The organization of intimacy: Managerialism, masculinity and the masculine subject, in Whitehead, S. & Barratt, F. (eds.) *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity

Kimmel, M. S. (1987) *Changing Men: New directions in the study of men and masculinity*. London: Sage

Kimmel, M. S. & Kaufmann, M. (1994) Weekend Warriors: the new men's movement, in Brod, H. & Kaufmann, M. (eds.) *Theorising Masculinities: Research on men and masculinities* London: Sage

Kimmel, M. S. (2008) *The Gendered Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Kindlon, D. & Thompson, M. (1999) *Raising Cain: Protecting the emotional life of boys*. London: Michael Joseph

Lareau, A. (2011) *Unequal childhoods: Class, race and family life* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). California: University of California Press

La Fontana, Kathryn, M., Cillessen, A. H., Antonius, H. N. (2002). Children's perceptions of popular and unpopular peers. *Developmental Psychology*, 38 (5) pp. 635-647

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago: Chicago.

Lather, P. (2004) Critical inquiry in qualitative research: Feminist and post structural perspectives, in De Marrais & Lapan, S. (eds) *Foundations for research: Methods of inquiry of education and social sciences*. Oxford: Taylor Francis

Lesko, N. (2000) *Masculinities at school*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Lingard, B. & Douglas, P. (1999) *Men engaging feminisms; pro-feminism, backlashes and schooling*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Lloyd, T. (2011) *Boys' underachievement in schools; literature review*. Belfast: Ulster University

Lodge, A. ( 2005) Gender and children's social world: esteemed and marginalised masculinities in the primary school playground. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 14(2), pp. 177-192.

Love, K., & Hamston, J. (2005) Voicing resistance: adolescent boys and the cultural practice of leisure reading. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 26 (2) pp. 183-202

Love, K., & Hamston, J. (2010) Teenage boys' leisure reading dispositions: juggling male youth culture and family cultural capital. *Educational Review*, 55 (2) pp. 161-177

McLellan, R. (2003) New ways of thinking about raising boys' achievement. *Topic*, 30 pp. 139-156

Mac an Ghaill, M. (1994) *The making of men: masculinities, sexualities and schooling*. Buckingham: Open University Press

MacInnes, J. (2003) The Sociology of Identity: Social science or social comment. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 55 (4) p. 532-543

MacInnes, J. (2008) *The End of Masculinity*. Buckingham: OUP

Mandel, L. & Shakeshaft, C. (2000) Heterosexism in middle schools, in Lesko, N. (ed.), *Masculinities at school*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (2011) *Designing qualitative research*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Sage

Martin, A., (2003). Findings from the ACT investigation into boys' education Enhancing the educational outcomes of boys. *Youth Studies Australia*, 22(4), pp. 27-36.

Martin, C.L. & Ruble, D.N. (2010) Patterns of Gender Development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61(1) pp. 353-381.

Martino, W. (1995) Gendered learning practices: Exploring the costs of hegemonic masculinity for girls and boys in schools in *Proceedings of the promoting gender equity conference*, pp. 343-364.

Martino, W. (1997 ). "A Bunch of Arseholes": Exploring the Politics of Masculinity for Adolescent Boys in Schools. *Social Alternatives*, 16(3), pp. 39-43.

Martino, W. (1999) 'Cool boys,' 'Party animals,' 'Squids' and 'Poofers': interrogating the dynamics and politics of adolescent masculinities in school. *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, 20 pp. 239-263

Martino, W. (2000) Policing masculinities: Investigating the role of homophobia and heteronormativity in the lives of adolescent schoolboys. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 8 (2), p. 213-236

Martino, W. (2003) Boys, masculinities and literacy: Addressing the issues. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. Vol 26 (3) p.9-27

Martino, W. & Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. (2003) *So what's a boy? Addressing issues of masculinity and schooling*. Maidenhead: OUP

Martino, W. & Kehler, M. (2007) Gender based literacy reform: A question of challenging or recuperating gender binaries. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30 pp.406-431



Martino, W. (2008) *Boys' underachievement: which boys are we talking about?* Toronto Canada: Ontario Ministry of Education

Martin, W. (2008b) Male teachers as role models: addressing issues of masculinity, pedagogy and the re-masculinisation of schooling . *Curriculum Enquiry*, 38(2) pp. 189-223

Martino, W. (2008c). The politics and crisis of boy's literacy: Beyond essential mindsets and the boy friendly curriculum, in R. Hamnett & K.Sandford, (eds). *Boys and girls and the myths of literacies and learning*, pp.91-144. Ontario: Canadian Scholar's Press

Mathur, R. & Berndtt, T. (2006) Relations of friends' activities to friendship quality. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 26 pp. 365-388

Mayeux, L., Sandstrom, M.J. and Cillessen, A.H.N. ( 2008) Is being popular a risky proposition? *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 18(1), pp. 49-74.

Messner, M.A. (2001) Friendship, intimacy and sexuality, in Whitehead, S. & Barrett, F. (eds) *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity

Messner, M. A. (2005) Still a man's world?: Studying masculinities and sport in Kimmel, M.S., Hearn, J. & Connell, R.W. (eds.) *The handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. London: Sage

Messer, M. A. (2007) *Out of Play: Critical essays on gender and sport*. New York: University of New York Press

Metcalf, A. & Humphries, M.(1985) *The Sexuality of Men*. London: Pluto Press

Millard, E. (1997) *Differently literate; boys, girls, and the schooling of literacy*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Millard, E. (2010) Differently Literate: gender identity and the construction of the developing reader. *Gender and Education*, 9 (1) pp. 31-48

Mills, M. (2000) Issues in implementing boys' programmes in schools: male teachers and empowerment. *Gender and Education*, 12 (2) pp. 221-238

Mills, S. (2003) *Michel Foucault*. London: Routledge.

Moir, A. & Moir, B. (1999) *Why Men Don't Iron*. London: Harper Collins.

Morgan, D. (1994) Theatre of war, combat, the military and masculinities, in Brod, H. & Kaufmann, M. (eds.) *Theorising Masculinities*. London: Sage

Morgan, D. (2001) Family, gender and masculinities, in Whitehead, S. & Barratt, F. (eds.) *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity

Morrison, P. & Eardley, T. (1985) *About Men*. Philadelphia: OUP

Moss, G. (1996) *Literacy and Gender: Researching texts, contexts and readers*. Oxford: Routledge

Moss, G. (2011) Policy and the search for explanations for the gender gap in literacy attainment. *Literacy*, 45 (3) pp.111-118

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP). (2010) *The Nation's Report Card*. London: NEAP

National Literacy Trust. (2012) *The boys commission report*. London: National Literacy Trust:

Nayak, A. & Kehily, M.J., (2013) *Gender, youth, and culture: young masculinities and femininities* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Newkirk, T. (2003) *Mireading masculinity: Boys, literacy and popular culture*. Portsmouth: Heinemann

Nisbet, J. & Watt, J. (1984) Case study, in Bell, J., Bush, T., Fox A., Goodey, J & S. Golding (eds). *Conducting Small Scale Investigations in Educational Management*, pp.79-92. London: Harper Row

Ofsted Report. (1996) *The Gender Divide*. London: Ofsted Publications

Ofsted Report. (2003) *Boys' Achievement in Secondary Schools*. London: Ofsted Publications

Ofsted Report. (2009) *English at the Crossroads*. London: Ofsted Publications

Paechter, C. (1998) *Educating the other: Gender, power and schooling*. London: Falmer Press

Paetcher, C. (2011) Gender, visible bodies and schooling: cultural pathologies of childhood. *Sport, Education and Society*, 24 (2) pp. 229-241

Paetcher, C. & Clark, S. (2007) Who are tomboys and how do we recognise them? *Women's Studies International Forum*, 30(4), pp. 342-354.

Patterson, M. & Elliot, R. (2002) Negotiating Masculinities: Advertising and the inversion of the male gaze. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 5 (3) pp. 231-249

Patton, M. Q. (2002) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Pease, B. (2000) *Recreating men: Post modern masculinity politics*. London: Sage

Petersen, A. (1998) *Unmasking the masculine: "Men" and "identity" in a sceptical age*. London: Sage

Peterson, S. (2006) Influence of gender on writing development, in MacArthur, C. A., Graham, S & Fitzgerald (eds.) *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guilford Press

Peterson, A. (2003) Research on men and masculinities: Some implications of recent theory for future work. *Men and Masculinities*, 6 (1): 54-69.

Pollack, W. (1998) *Real Boys*. New York: Owl Books.

Rapley, T. (2011) Some pragmatics of qualitative data analysis, in D. Silverman (ed.) *Qualitative research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Sage, pp.273-90

Reay, D. & Wiliam, D. (1999) 'I'll be a nothing': structure, agency and the construction of identity through assessment [1]. *British Educational Research Journal*, 25(3), pp. 343-354.

Reed, L.R. (1999) Troubling Boys and Disturbing Discourses on Masculinity and Schooling: a feminist exploration of current debates and interventions concerning boys in school. *Gender & Education*, 11(1), pp. 93-110.

Reese, T. W. (2010) *Masculinities in theory*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell

Rendel, M. (1985) The Winning of the Sex Discrimination Act, in Arnot, M. (Ed.), *Race and Gender: equal opportunities in policies in education*, pp. 81-95. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Renold, E. (2001). Learning the 'hard' way; boys, hegemonic masculinity and the negotiation of learner identities in the primary school. *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, 22 (3) pp. 369-385

Renold, E. (2004) 'Other' boys: negotiating non-hegemonic masculinities in the primary school. *Gender & Education*, 16(2), pp. 247-266.

Renold, E. (2005) "All they've got on their brains is football". Sport, masculinity and the gendered practices of playground. *Sport, Education & Society*, 2(1), pp. 5-23.

Renold, E. (2005b) *Girls, boys, and junior sexualities : exploring children's gender and sexual relations in the primary school*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Rowan, L. (2002) *Boys, literacies, and schooling; the dangerous territories of gender-based literacy reform*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Sabo, D. (1994) The body politics of sports injury: Culture, power and the pain principle. *Changing Men: Issues in gender, sex and politics*, 16 pp. 24-25

Sasson-Levy, O. (2007) Individual bodies, collective state interests: The case of Israeli combat soldiers. *Men and Masculinities*, 10 (3) pp. 296-32

Schultz, K. (2006) Qualitative research writing, in MacArthur, C. A., Graham, S. & Fitzgerald, J. (eds.). *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guildford Press

Scott, D. & R. Usher (1999) The Place of Philosophical Issues in Educational Research, *Researching Education: data, Methods and Theory in Educational Enquiry*, pp 9-22, London: Cassell

Scott, D. & R. Usher. (2011). Critical Approaches to Research, *Researching Education: data, Methods and Theory in Educational Enquiry*. pp 26-47, London: Cassell

Seidler, V.S. (2005) *Transforming Masculinities: Men, Cultures, Bodies, Power, Sex and Love*. Milton Park: Routledge

Seidler, V.S. (2007) Masculinities, bodies and emotional life. *Men and Masculinities*, 10 (1) p.9-21

Shilling, C. (2003) *The body and social theory*. London: Sage

Swandt, T. A. (2000) Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Enquiry in N.K.Denzin, & Y.S. Lincoln, (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* CA: Sage Publications

Seale, C. (1999) Quality in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 5 (4) pp.465-478

Shacklock, G. & Smyth, J. (1998) *Being reflexive in critical educational and social research*. London: Falmer Press

Shain, F. (2003) *The Schooling and Identity of Asian Girls*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

Shulman, L. S. (1996) Just in case: Reflections on learning from experience, in Colbert, J., Trimble, K. & P. Desberg, (eds). *The Case for Education: Contemporary Approaches for Using Case Methods*. MA: Allyn and Bacon

Silverman, D. (2005) *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage

Simpson, R. (2009) *Men in caring occupations; doing gender differently*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Skattebol, J. (2006) Playing boys: the body, identity and belonging in the early years. *Gender & Education*, 18(5), pp. 507-522.

Skelton, C. (1989) *Whatever happens to little women? Gender and primary schooling*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Skelton, C. (1997) Primary Boys and Hegemonic Masculinities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(3), pp. 349-369.

Skelton, C. (2000) 'A passion for football': Dominant masculinities and Primary schooling. *Sport, Education & Society*, 5(1), pp. 5-18.

Skelton, C. (2001) *Schooling the boys; masculinities and primary education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Skelton, C. (2003) Gender stereotyping and primary schools: moving the agenda on. *Education Review*, 16(2), pp. 75-80.

Skelton, C., Francis, B. & Smulyan, L. (2006) *The SAGE handbook of gender and education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Skelton, C. & Francis, B. (2011a) Successful boys and literacy. *Curriculum Enquiry*, 41:4, pp. 456-478

Skelton, C., & Francis B. (2011b) The 'Renaissance Child': high achievement and gender in later modernity. *Testimonial journal of inclusive education* 16:4 441-459



Skelton, C. (2012) Male Primary Teachers and Perceptions of Masculinity. *Educational Review*, 55(2), pp. 195-209.

Skelton, C. (2012b) Men teachers and the “feminised” primary school: a review of the literature. *Educational Review*, 64(1), pp. 1-19.

Smith, T.E. and Leaper, C. (2006) Self-Perceived Gender Typicality and the Peer Context During Adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 16(1), pp. 91-103.

Smith, E. (2003) Failing boys and moral panics: Perspectives on the underachievement debate. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51 (3), pp. 282-295.

Smith, J. A. (2009) *The daddy shift*. Boston: Beacon Press

Smith, S. (2004) The non-fiction reading habits of young successful readers: forming connections between masculinity and reading. *Literacy*, 38 (1) pp. 10-16

Sommers, C.H. (2000) *The war against boys; how misguided feminism is harming our young men*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Spender, D. & Sarah, E. (1988) *Learning to lose; sexism and education*, 2nd edn. London: The Women's Press.

Stainton Rogers, W. & Stainton Rogers, R. (2001) *The psychology of gender and sexuality: an introduction*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Stephens, E. & Lorentzen, J. (2007) *Men and Masculinities: Special Issue on the Male Body*, 10 (1)

Stierer, B. (1991) Assessing reading standards: A continuing debate. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 21 (2) p. 119-127

Summerskill, B. (2000) Daddy's home, in *The Observer Focus*. 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2000

Sutherland, J. (2000) From bias 'in the text' to 'teacher talk around the text': An exploration of teacher discourse and gendered foreign language textbook texts. *Linguistics and Education*, 11 (3) pp .251-286

Sutherland, J. (2012) *Language, Gender and children's fiction*. London: Bloomsbury

Swain, J. (2002) The Resources and Strategies Boys Use to Establish Status in a Junior School without Competitive Sport. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 23 (1), pp. 91-107.

Swain, J. (2006) Reflections on patterns of masculinity in school settings. *Men and masculinities*, 8 pp. 331-349

Theberge, N. (1991) Women and the Olympic game: A consideration of gender, sport and social change, in Landry, F. (ed) *Sport, the third millennium*. Quebec: Laval University Press

Thorne, B. (1993) *Gender Play: Boys and girls at school*. Buckingham: OUP

Tong, R. (1998) *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Colorado: Westview Press

Turner, L. (2013) Girls beat boys again in GCSE battle, in *The Independent* 23/8/2013

Van Leeuwen, T. (2008) *Discourse and Practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford: OUP

Wade, B. and Moore, M. (1993) *Bookstart in Birmingham Book Trust Report*, London: Book Trust

Walker, K. (1994) Men, Women, Friendship: What they say, what they do. *Gender and Society*, 8 (2) p.246-265

Walkerdine, V. (1989) Femininity as Performance. *Oxford Review of Education*, 15 pp. 267-279

Watson, A., Kehler, M. & Martino, W. (2010) The Problem of Boys' Literacy Underachievement: Raising Some Questions. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53 (5), pp. 356-361.

Weiner, G. (1985) *Just a bunch of girls: feminist approaches to schooling*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Wenger, E. (1999) *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. V., Del Rio, P. & Alvarez, A. (1995) *Sociocultural studies of mind*. Cambridge: CUP

Wharton, S. (2005) 'Invisible Females, Incapable Males: gender construction in children's reading scheme'. *Language and Education*, 3(2) pp. 38-251

Whitehead, M. (2010) *Language and literacy in the early years, 0-7, (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)* London: SAGE

Whitehead, S. (2002) *Men and masculinities; key themes and new directions*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Whitehead, S., Talahite-Moodley, A. & Moodley, R. (2013) *Gender and identity: key themes and new directions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Whitehead, T. (2010) Dangerous books for boys culture needed in schools, says Gove, in *The Telegraph* 12/9/2010

Whitmire, R. (2010) *Why boys fail; saving our sons from an educational system that's leaving them behind*. New York: AMACOM

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour*. Surrey: Ashgate Publications

Yeandle, S. (1995) Change in the gender composition of the workforce, conference paper, *European Sociological Association Conference, Budapest*

Younger, M. & Warrington, M. (2005) *Raising Boys' Achievement*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families

## **APPENDIX I**

### **Interview Guide**

Introduction – about me, rules with each other, safeguarding issues.

Here to ask you about school and the subjects you do and don't like to do. I also want to know about other parts of school life; I want to find out from you what it is like to be a primary school boy in 2014 and what it takes to be 'successful' at school. Describe format – first of all a chat about subjects /activities and success/outside the classroom and then completing an activity to try and construct a 'popular' pupil.

### **SUBJECTS AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

- Tell me what kind of subjects and things you learn about at school?
- Out of those subjects, can you tell me which is your favourite and what it is you like about it?
  - If it is the activities, what it is about those particular kinds of activities that you enjoy
- What is the subject you like the least and why?
  - If it is the activities what is it about those particular kinds of activities that you dislike
- Is there anybody here who just doesn't like any of the school subjects at all?
  - What aspects of learning in itself do you not enjoy?
- How does literacy and numeracy fit into the school day? Do you think you spend enough time doing literacy and numeracy?
- What do you like/dislike about the way numeracy is taught?
- What do you like/dislike about the way literacy is taught? (explore like/dislike reading –writing) – how is the writing for maths different (if at all)?
- Do you read at home for pleasure?
  - If yes, do you think school or home has influenced you? (Do family read?)
  - If not, why not? (Do family read?)

### **SCHOOL AND SUCCESS**

- What does it mean to you to be 'successful' at school. What would you consider to be 'success'.

- Explore:
  - comments on academic success/SATs/feelings about SATs/are SATs more difficult for those who do not like passive activities/ should it be different?
  - Apart from the actual work what other ways is it possible to be successful at school (may have to prompt the idea of social success).
  - What is social success? Do you have 'popular' people at school? / boys who are looked up to / boys who others would like to be like?
  - Are the popular boys the ones who are good academically/who achieve highly? – If not what makes them popular – what are they good at?

### **BOYS IN RELATION TO GIRLS**

If I was asking these same questions to girls, would the answers be different? How and Why?

## APPENDIX II

### Consent letter to children

Dear *Insert Name of Child*,

My name is [Jennifer Wells](#) and I study at Keele University. I am currently doing some research on what boys think about school and the subjects they learn

Your parents are happy for you to be one of the children who take part in this study, but you do not have to if you do not want to. Also if you decide you do want to take part but then change your mind about it, then that is alright too. If you decide you don't want to take part then you will not feel left out as there are no activities as a class.

If you are happy to talk to me about these things, then I will arrange for us to meet in school time and you can choose the friends you would like to be in a group with. The group discussion will last 45 minutes and I will record the discussion so that I can concentrate on what you are telling me.

I will not use any names when I write down what the group has told me and I will not tell your parents and the school what you have told me.

The things you tell me will help me to understand how different boys feel about school and the subjects they learn. There are no right answers and I really want your opinion!

If you are happy to take part in this group discussion then please fill in the slip below and return it to the School Office or to your form teacher.

Thank you,

Signed: [Jennifer Wells](#)

-----

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX III

### Invitation letter to Head teacher

Keele University  
Staffordshire  
ST5 5BG  
[j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk)  
mobile phone number to be provided

### Boys and Literacy

Dear Head teacher [insert name],

I am writing to ask whether you are willing to consent to your school's participation in the above named study.

This is a study which is being conducted by Jennifer Wells as research for a Doctorate in Education programme at Keele University.

The attached **Information Sheet** gives further details about the aims of the project and also what your participation will entail should be willing to involve your school in the research.

Please do not hesitate to contact me ([j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk) or [mobile phone number]) with any queries or concerns that you may have about the research.

If you are happy for your school to be involved in the research you can let me know by telephone: [mobile phone] or by completing the attached **consent form** and returning it to me at [j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk) or by post to:

Jennifer Wells  
c/o Dr Farzana Shain  
School of Public Policy and Professional Practice (Education)  
Keele University  
Staffordshire  
ST5 5BG

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely  
Jennifer Wells

## **APPENDIX IV**

### **Information sheet to School**

**Title:** Boys and Literacy

**Project leaders:** Jennifer Wells

#### **Project summary**

The academic performance of boys has been a central theme for debate in recent years with a particular focus on their poor performance in literacy tasks as compared to that of girls. Research surrounding boys' education has brought to light how academic achievement is often seen as 'uncool' and this has been linked to an 'anti-learning, laddish culture'. This 'laddish' construction of masculinity adopted by some boys is often contrary to the values of the education system and has been linked with the negative perception and labelling of boys who do achieve academically. This has led to various initiatives focussed on improving boys' engagement with literacy and also to bring about an improvement with engagement with academic success on a more general level. However, whilst there has been an increasing focus on boys at secondary school there is still a gap in research which explores in detail the experience of boys in a primary school setting. Also, much of the research carried out appears to focus on the changing of negative perceptions rather than investigating strategies used by boys who do engage with school and strive for success.

#### **Aims and Scope of the Study**

The study sets out to research how the construction of masculinity impacts on how boys (in years 4 and 5) feel about learning and literacy. It aims to find out if the way in which boys construct their male identity includes rejecting some practices which shape the literate individual such as reading as a leisure activity and personal expressive response. A particular aim of the study is to look at how boys talk about their perception of academic success and to look at strategies used by boys who achieve highly at school and who are popular amongst their peers.

### **Why has my school been chosen?**

As the researcher I wanted the project conducted locally. Your school has been chosen because it is well known to me and you have expressed an interest in taking part in my research.

### **Does my school have to take part?**

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. You also are free to withdraw your school from this study at any time and without giving reasons.

### **What will happen if my school takes part?**

If you consent to your school's participation in the research, you will be asked to confirm this by completing the attached consent forms.

You will then be asked to help me identify relevant staff for discussion groups and teaching observations (see below). This list should include staff teaching years 4, 5 and 6.

We will also ask you to forward letters to children which ask them to consent to their participation in the study. This will consist of focus groups with children in years 4, 5 and 6.

### **Focus groups and interviews with children**

I intend for these to take place in the school time and each focus group/interview will last for approximately 45 minutes. I propose to hold focus groups for years 4 and 5. The focus groups will explore what children think about different subjects and their perception of academic success. I will ask them about whether they label boys as being particular types of 'boy' and what the attributes of those boys might be. I will do this through some activities so that the questions are not intrusive or personal. Each focus group will be limited to 6-8 children. I will then interview some children to discuss the issues raised at the focus groups in greater depth.

Written consent will be obtained from parents for their children to take part in the focus groups (parent for child consent form and information sheet). Where parents give consent we will seek the additional consent of pupils. All staff, parents and children who give written consent to take part in the research will be free to withdraw this consent at any time without giving reasons.

**What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?**

There may be some benefits to you personally, or for your school as the discussion and opportunity to focus on boys and their literacy may contribute towards a greater understanding of the challenges involved. Some of the findings may have relevance for the curriculum and for school policy and there is potential for children's and teachers' voices to be heard through the dissemination of research findings to a wider audience through the published papers.

**What are the risks (if any) of taking part?**

There are no risks associated with the study. If you identify a discomfort, risk or disadvantage during the research, you are invited to bring it to my attention at your earliest convenience. I do not however expect any problems to arise in this study.

**How will information about me be used?**

Data will be collected through written observations and digitally recorded discussions. The information collected will inform publications in academic journals. I also plan to hold a dissemination event at the end of the project drawing on the anonymised findings of the project. The information collected may also be used in future publications.

**Who will have access to information about my school?**

Any focus groups conducted will be taped, using a digital voice recorder. The data will be transcribed by myself. The digital recordings and transcribed data files will be stored in accordance with British Academy guidelines on a computer with password protection. Data from observations (where consent is given) will be recorded by hand (notes) and then typed. Once the research is written up, all copies of the recordings will be deleted. The anonymised transcripts will be retained by the Principal Investigator for five years and then destroyed.

All of the data collected will be anonymised and so no participant (including the school and also the individuals who take part) will be identifiable. I do however have to work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example in circumstances whereby I am made aware of future criminal activity, abuse either to yourself or another (i.e. child or sexual abuse) or suicidal tendencies I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.

### **What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the me I will do my best to answer your questions. You should contact me on [j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk). Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact me you may contact my supervisor Dr Farzana Shain on 01782 733118 or [f.shain@keele.ac.uk](mailto:f.shain@keele.ac.uk).

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:-

Nicola Leighton  
Research Governance Officer  
Research & Enterprise Services  
Dorothy Hodgkin Building  
Keele University  
ST5 5BG  
E-mail: [n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk)  
Tel: 01782 733306

## APPENDIX V

### Consent Form – Head Teacher

**Title of Project:** *Boys and Literacy*  
**Name of Principal Investigator:** *Jennifer Wells*

**Please tick box if you  
agree with the statement**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my school's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my school at any time.

I am happy for my school to take part in this study.

I understand that data collected about my school during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## APPENDIX VI

### Consent form for Parent (for child participation)

**Title of Project:** *Boys and Literacy*

**Name of Principal Investigator:** *Jennifer Wells*

**Please tick box if you  
agree with the statement**

- 1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐
- 2 I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that my child is free to withdraw at any time.
- 3 I agree to let my child take part in this study:  
  
in the focus groups ☐  
  
I am happy for my child to be observed in class ☐
- 4 I understand that data collected about my child during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication. ☐
- 5 I agree to the focus groups being audio recorded ☐

I agree to the observation being audio-recorded

☐

Name of Child \_\_\_\_\_

Name of parent \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature \_\_\_\_\_



## Use of Quotes

**Title of Project:** *Boys and Literacy*

**Name of Principal Investigator:** *Jennifer Wells*

Please tick box if you  
agree with the statement

1 I agree for any quotes to be used

☐

2 I do not agree for any quotes to be used

☐

---

Name of participant

---

Date

---

Signature

---

Researcher

---

Date

---

Signature

## APPENDIX VII

# ETHICAL REVIEW PANEL

## Application Form (Staff and PGR Students)

- To be completed for every research project involving human participants/subjects;
- The form must be authorised by your Research Institute Director / (or for applicants who are members of RI Social Sciences the application can be signed off by your Research Centre Head)/Supervisor /Head of School as appropriate
- Both an electronic copy & hard copy of all documentation must be provided.

**APPROVAL MUST BE OBTAINED BEFORE** potential participants are approached to take part in any research.

**Information regarding the completion of the ethical review panel application form:**

**Section A** – To be completed by all applicants.

**Section B** – To be completed by applicants who have already obtained Ethics Approval from a separate committee.

**Section C** – To be completed by applicants requiring approval from a University Ethical Review Panel

**Section D** – To be completed by all applicants.

*Further information regarding the completion of the application can be found in Section E (at the end of this document)*

### SECTION A (to be completed by all applicants)

Project Title:	Literacy and the Construction of Masculinities – a Pilot Study
Proposed start date:	1 <sup>st</sup> March 2012

Proposed end date for 'field work' (eg interviews):	10 <sup>th</sup> March -10 <sup>th</sup> April 2012
Name of Researcher (applicant):	Jennifer Wells
Status:	<b>POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENT</b>
Keele Email address:	j.f.wells@ippm.keele.ac.uk
Correspondence address:	5 Elton Road, Sandbach, Cheshire, CW11 3NE
Keele Telephone number:	N/A

**SECTION B** (to be completed by applicants who have already obtained ethics approval from a separate committee)

<p><b>Has your project already been approved by an ethics committee? (for example, an NHS research ethics committee)</b></p> <p>If <b>YES</b> the following documentation should be sent directly to the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee, C/O Nicola Leighton, University Research Ethics Committee Administrator, Research &amp; Enterprise Services, Dorothy Hodgkin Building, e-mail <a href="mailto:n.leighton@keele.ac.uk">n.leighton@keele.ac.uk</a>, telephone 01782 733306</p>		NO
<p>A completed and signed hard copy of this application form (please complete Sections A, B and D) and an electronic copy should also be e-mailed to <a href="mailto:n.leighton@keele.ac.uk">n.leighton@keele.ac.uk</a></p>	Signed hard copy:	NO
	Electronic copy:	YES

**SECTION C** (to be completed by applicants who have NOT already obtained ethics approval from a separate committee)

<p><b>If your project requires approval by a University Ethical Review Panel (ERP).</b></p> <p>The following documentation should be forwarded to Michele Dawson, ERP Administrator, Research &amp; Enterprise Services, Dorothy Hodgkin Building, telephone 01782 733588. An electronic copy of the application form and all necessary documentation should also be e-mailed to <a href="mailto:m.dawson@uso.keele.ac.uk">m.dawson@uso.keele.ac.uk</a>. An application cannot be considered until a signed copy is received and accompanied by an electronic copy.</p>		
<p>A completed and signed hard copy of this application form (please complete Sections A, C and D) and an electronic copy should also be e-mailed to <a href="mailto:m.dawson@uso.keele.ac.uk">m.dawson@uso.keele.ac.uk</a></p>	<p>Signed copy attached:</p> <p>Electronic copy:</p>	<p>NO</p> <p>YES</p>
<p>A hard copy of the summarised project proposal <b>attached</b> to this form, <b>NO MORE THAN</b> two sides of A4</p> <p>An electronic copy of the summarised project proposal</p>		<p>NO</p> <p>YES</p>
<p><b><i>And, if they are applicable given the study's design and approaches;</i></b></p>		
<p>A letter of invitation for participants;</p>		<p>YES</p>
<p>An information sheet which should normally include following sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why the participant has been chosen;</li> <li>○ What will happen to participants if they take part</li> <li>○ A discussion of the possible disadvantages, risks and benefits of taking part</li> <li>○ The procedures for ensuring confidentiality and anonymity (if appropriate)</li> <li>○ The proposed use of the research findings</li> <li>○ Contact details of the principal investigator plus details of additional support agencies (if necessary)</li> </ul> <p>A template for a participant information sheet is available from the Research &amp; Enterprise Services website via the following link</p>		<p>YES / NA</p> <p>(delete as appropriate)</p>

<a href="http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchgovernance/researchethics/">http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchgovernance/researchethics/</a>	
<p>A copy of the participant consent form/s;</p> <p>Templates for consent forms are available from the Research &amp; Enterprise Services website via the following link <a href="http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchgovernance/researchethics/">http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchgovernance/researchethics/</a></p>	<p>YES / NA</p> <p>(delete as appropriate)</p>
<p>Copies of any questionnaire, interview schedules or topic guides.</p> <p>Topic guides and data collection method included on description of research</p>	YES

#### (PARTICIPANTS' CONSENTS)

<p><b>1. Will the researchers inform participants of all aspects of the research that might reasonably be expected to influence willingness to participate and in particular, any negative consequences that might occur?</b></p> <p>All participants and their parents will be given a leaflet explaining the details of the study. The leaflet is designed to be straightforward to understand.</p> <p>Prior permission was sought from the school who have agreed to the study (the email confirming this is attached). Cheshire East local authority were also contacted but have no specific requirement or policy on research in schools as this is at the discretion of the Head Teacher.</p> <p><b>2. Will all participants be provided with a written information sheet and be provided with an opportunity to provide (or withhold) written consent?</b></p> <p>See attached</p>	<p>YES</p> <p>YES</p>
--	-----------------------

<p><b>3. Is consent being sought for the dataset collected to be used for future research projects?</b></p> <p>As this is a pilot study the participants may go on to be included in the main study and if so it may be useful to use the first input to ascertain how the children's perception has developed and progressed.</p> <p><b>4. What are the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate)?</b></p> <p>For the pilot study the Head Teacher of the school will identify and ask boys for their consent to participate in the focus groups. The inclusion criteria is that the participants are from year 7 and of varying academic ability and engagement with education. There are no individual criteria other than that of age. It is not expected that any boys will be excluded although issues with the selection of boys by teachers at the school may exclude the voices of some boys and this will be explored during the course of the pilot.</p> <p><b>5. Please explain briefly (and in 'lay' terms) why you plan to use these particular criteria?</b></p> <p>As an outsider, in the first instance, I need to work with the school and build a relationship. I feel it is important at the pilot study stage for the Head Teacher to retain control and for me to demonstrate to her the work I will be doing and build trust. I am aware that there may be issues around the school's part in the selection of participants for the main study and therefore felt it would be useful to assess the impact of this. In trying to assess and judge the criteria of their choice of selection (which may be beyond my criteria of requiring a range of academic ability and engagement) I may be able to pre-empt or minimise such issues at a later stage. As well as collecting qualitative data, the pilot also serves to test method and as it is expected that there may be issues surrounding issues of participants being 'volunteered' by the school I have opted to allow, scrutinise and explore them rather than to try and avoid them at this stage. Included into the focus group will be a discussion of the volunteering process and to what extent the boys feel they have made an informed choice to participate.</p>	<p>YES</p> <p>YES</p>
<p><b>6. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable?</b> Participants in the study are all children in year 7 of secondary school. There are</p>	<p>YES</p>

<p>therefore issues of power both in the collection and interpretation of data. I have chosen to minimise this by researching in a school other than my own where I am not known as a teacher. However, as an adult working with children it is accepted that there will still be inequalities. Every effort will be made to ensure there is adequate checking with participants to interpret their language as intended. Ground rules will be set in the focus group of respect for others and their comments.</p> <p>Activities are used in data collection to protect the children from being asked questions which they may find intrusive so that any discomfort with the line of questioning can be gauged. The whole process consists of both activity and discussion which also serves to vary the pace to ensure that the process is not exhausting. The maximum time for the session will be 60mins so that the children are not expected to concentrate for longer than the average length of a lesson.</p> <p>I am CRB checked as I am a teacher and I have also had safeguarding training. I am therefore aware that in an interview situation there is always the possibility that children may choose to disclose information of a sensitive nature which may need to be passed on to the relevant authority. Participants will be made aware of my obligation in this respect.</p> <p>There may be issues connected to school involvement in selection of participants which means that some voices may not be heard. This is an area which will be explored in the pilot to investigate ways in which this can be circumvented.</p>	YES
<p><b>7. Will the study involve participants who are unable to give valid (informed) consent (e.g. children and adults lacking mental capacity)?</b></p> <p>Letters will be sent to parents with information about the study which gives them the chance to opt out.</p> <p>Consent from the children who are participating will be on an opt-in basis. This will be gained in advance and will be gained again verbally at the start of the focus group session to give another chance to refuse.</p>	YES
<p><b>8. Does the investigation involve observing participants unawares?</b></p>	NO
<p><b>9. Will the confidentiality of participants be maintained?</b></p>	NO

All participants will remain anonymous but their comments may need to be quoted for the pilot study. This will be explained fully to participants at the outset of the focus group. The data will be kept on an encrypted memory stick and will not be available to any third party nor will the information be used by any person other than myself.	
<b>10. Will participants require any support to take part in the research (eg. disability support, interpreter)?</b>	NO

**(PROCEDURES)**

<b>11. Does the research involve people being investigated for a problem which has received medical, psychiatric, clinical psychological or similar attention?</b>  If YES, please give details:	NO
<b>12. Are drugs, placebos or other substances (eg food substances, vitamins) to be administered to participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?</b>	NO
<b>13. Will blood or other bodily fluids/tissues be obtained from participants?</b>  If YES, please give rationale.	NO
<b>14. Is pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study?</b>  If YES, please give rationale.	NO



**(RESEARCH PROCESS)**

<b>15. Will participants receive any reimbursements or other payments</b>  If YES, how will they be reimbursed/compensated?	NO
<b>16. Does the actual or potential research involve the analysis of data participants will not realise would be used by you for research purposes (e.g. confidential criminal, medical or financial records)?</b>	NO
<b>17. Does the research involve the possible disclosure of confidential information to other participants?</b>  If YES, please give rationale.	NO
<b>18. Will the researchers de-brief participants to ensure that they understand the nature of the research and monitor possible misconceptions or negative effects?</b>  If NO, please give rationale.	YES
<b>19. Are there any <u>other</u> ethical issues that you think might be raised by the research?</b>  If YES, please give details:	NO

**(Health & Safety)**

<p><b>20. Does the project have any health &amp; safety implications for the researcher?</b></p> <p><b>If YES,</b> please outline the arrangements which are in place to minimise these risks</p>	<p>NO</p>
<p><b>FOR STAFF ONLY</b></p> <p><b>21. Does your research involve travel overseas?</b></p> <p><b>If YES,</b></p> <p>Have you consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice?</p> <p><a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/">http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/</a></p> <p>Have you completed and submitted the prior authorisation to travel form? Available from <a href="http://www.keele.ac.uk/finance/payments/reimbursementoftravelexpenses/requestfortravelTRAVA.pdf">http://www.keele.ac.uk/finance/payments/reimbursementoftravelexpenses/requestfortravelTRAVA.pdf</a> (travel)</p> <p>Have you completed and submitted the risk assessment form? Available from <a href="http://www.keele.ac.uk/finance/insurance/travelinsurance/travellingoverseas-">http://www.keele.ac.uk/finance/insurance/travelinsurance/travellingoverseas-</a></p>	<p>YES / NO</p> <p>(delete as appropriate)</p> <p>YES / NO</p> <p>(delete as appropriate)</p> <p>YES / NO</p> <p>(delete</p>

<a href="#">policyriskassessment/</a>	as appropriate)          YES / NO  (delete as appropriate)
<p><b>FOR STUDENTS ONLY</b></p> <p><b>22. Does the research involve travelling overseas?</b></p> <p><b>If YES</b></p> <p><b>For home students</b> - have you consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice? <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/">http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/</a></p> <p><b>For international students</b> - have you also sought travel advice/guidance from the Foreign Office (or equivalent body) of your country?</p> <p><b>For all students</b> - will you be visiting any areas for which particular risks have been identified or for which the advice given is not to travel to this area?</p> <p><b>If YES</b></p> <p>(a) Please give details</p>	NO          YES / NO  (delete as appropriate)       YES / NO  (delete as appropriate)       NO

<p>(b) Please outline the arrangements in place to manage these risks.</p> <p><b>23. What insurance arrangements are in place?</b> (Please contact Alan Slater on 01782 733525 to ascertain if you will be covered by University Insurance)</p>	<p>Univer sity Insura nce / Person al Insura nce</p> <p>(delete as appropri ate)</p>
---	--

**SECTION D (to be completed by all applicants)**

<p><b>Signatures</b></p>  <p><b>Principal Investigator / Research Student:</b></p> <p>I understand that I must comply with the University's regulations and other applicable codes of ethics at all times.</p> <p>.....</p> <p><b>Principal Investigator / Research Student*</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>Date</p>  <p>*please delete as appropriate</p>	<p><b>Signatures</b></p>  <p><b>Research Institute Director / (or for applicants who are members of RI Social Sciences the application can be signed off by your Research Centre Head) / Supervisor / Head of School</b></p> <p>I confirm that I have reviewed this application and any supporting documentation and am satisfied for it to proceed for ethical review.</p> <p>.....</p> <p><b>Research Institute Director / Research Centre Head / Supervisor / Head of School *</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>Date</p>  <p>*please delete as appropriate</p>
--	---

**Please ensure when submitting your proposal that you have provided a hard copy and e-mailed a copy of all the documentation to the relevant administrator:-**

**Applicants who have already obtained ethics approval from a separate committee** should forward documentation to

Nicola Leighton, University Research Ethics Committee Administrator, Research & Enterprise Services, Dorothy Hodgkin Building, e-mail [n.leighton@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.leighton@keele.ac.uk), telephone 01782 733306.

## APPENDIX VIII

### Activity



For this task I want you to make an avatar called 'Mr Cool At School'. He needs all the right things to make him the most popular lad in the class.

**Clothes:** Smart uniform / tries to make it a little bit different / has branded stuff /other

---

**Hair:** Particular style ?

---

**Good at:** X-Box / football / other sports / top of the class / knitting / BMX /other

---

**Hobbies:** sport / reading / hang gliding / Runescape / Gaming / other

---

**Good at:** maths / English / Science / art / PE /other

---

If he could be any celebrity or famous person who would he want to be?

---

How does he behave in the classroom? /How does he behave in the playground?

|

